

September 16th, 2026

To our neighbors across East Tennessee,

Heartfelt greetings! We are clergy and faith leaders from many traditions across this region. We write together because our traditions, however distinct in practice and belief, rest on a shared moral foundation that to love God and to love our neighbor are not two commandments but one, and that a community which neglects the second has not, in truth, kept the first.

It is from that foundation that we speak to the serious situation that has developed in our region.

This year the Tennessee General Assembly, in open coordination with the White House, passed a slate of new immigration laws for our state, even though immigration law is strictly federal jurisdiction. What advocates warned against through the winter is now the law of the land, however unjust. It is now a crime under state law to remain in Tennessee after a final order of immigration removal. Local governments must verify the immigration status of anyone seeking most public assistance, and their employees face penalties if they do not. Our police are being conscripted into federal ICE enforcement whether or not their communities consent. For two sessions running, members of the General Assembly have tried to make our public schools track and report the immigration status of their own students; an effort that has not yet become law, but it will likely be introduced again.

These laws answer no genuine crisis of public safety. They deliberately construct a climate of fear whose logic is not the protection of this community but the racial targeting of a particular population of people within it, discrimination now given the force of law. The harm does not fall only on those without documentation. It falls on US citizen children in mixed-status families, on patients who will now avoid seeking medical care, on victims of crime who will not call for help, on families who go without food because they are too afraid to go grocery shopping, all because institutions our own taxes pay for have been turned into instruments of federal surveillance. When fear becomes the organizing principle of public life, every last one of us bears its cost.

These are not just issues to be decided in Nashville; they are local decisions too. Knox County has become a regional hub for immigration detention. Since Jan. 1, 2025, over 5,000 community members have been held in detention on immigration matters, a *civil* offense, at the Roger D. Wilson Detention Facility on Maloneyville Road; brought in from across East and Middle Tennessee through an expanding web of ICE enforcement agreements. And there are plans being made to expand these operations here. Solicitations believed to represent ICE are circulating across a multi-county region around

Knoxville, seeking to expand operations and to hire dozens of new ICE agents, positioning our region as a center of ICE enforcement for years ahead. *None of this has been set before us for meaningful public deliberation.*

We are not strangers to this work. For years we have stood with our immigrant neighbors in vigil, in advocacy, and in accompaniment; we have sat with families in our own congregations who live in fear; we have watched as the government has intentionally blurred, confused, and distorted the line between “authorized” and “unauthorized” immigration status, so that status can be revoked, pathways to legal status vanish, and even lawful permanent residence no longer is a guarantee of safety from ICE. We know of minor US citizens who have been deported from this country along with their parents. This threatens all of us, because a community that will deny one neighbor due process has already decided that it’s not a given right for any of us.

So we want to speak plainly to those in our community who are afraid:

We see you. You are our neighbors and our co-workers, the parents at our children’s schools, the families who worship alongside us, the faces in our clinics and our shops. You are not alone, and you are not forgotten. We cannot promise you that this season will get better before it gets worse; but we can promise you that we will not keep silent while it lasts, and that you will not face it by yourselves.

We affirm that nations have the right to regulate their borders, and to do so justly. But just regulation has recognizable markers. It grants due process. It treats each person as a human being and not a category. It does not enlist hospitals, schools, or police against the communities they exist to serve. The laws recently enacted in our state fail in all of these regards. Out of the conviction to uphold the God-given dignity of every person who lives among us, we are compelled to call for the following:

- We call on those who hold power in this region, specifically the Knox County government and sheriff department, to terminate the Knox County jail detention bed contract with ICE. This contract can be ended, and we call for it to be ended. We reject spending our local money and resources on increasing suffering in our community. In addition, we ask our local elected leaders to refuse every expansion of ICE enforcement operations in our region. These programs do not make our communities safer or more secure, but actually increase suspicion and mistrust of law enforcement.

- To all police officers of our communities, most of you who took up this work to protect your neighbors and not to hunt for them, we make an appeal rather than a demand: The law can compel your department, but it cannot compel your conscience. We urge you to exercise every discretion the law still leaves you, decline the errands that reach beyond what it strictly requires, and treat the frightened people in front of you as the neighbors they are. Where the choice remains yours, choose mercy.
- To all current and former elected officials of both political parties, we appeal to you to speak publicly and privately to the current leadership in the State Legislature to cease and desist from spreading malicious falsehoods about immigrants in our state and nation and enacting anti-immigrant legislation that harms all Tennessee residents, and strangles small businesses, farmers, and repels new businesses.
- We call on our neighbors who hold property and standing, landlords and developers, business owners and institutions, to refuse to house ICE offices and facilities. Your consent is yours to withhold. And the public deserves a voice in the expansion of ICE operations in our community.
- And we call for an end to the deportation of our neighbors on the sole basis of where they were born, particularly those who came here legally. A person's country of origin is not a crime, and we will not abide its being treated as one.

We will continue to show up, to speak, and to accompany our neighbors through whatever the coming months and years require, and we invite every person of conscience in this region to stand with us.

The measure of any community is found in how it treats its most vulnerable. We intend to be measured accordingly.

Multi-Faith Leaders of East Tennessee

multifaithetn@gmail.com

Individual signatories to be attached.