

Alliance supports Gilles Bikindou, and scores of others being detained by ICE

By Paula Clayton Dempsey

Individuals threatened with deportation today serve in our communities in various ways – as caretakers, childcare workers, small business owners, gardeners, cooks, builders and also as contributing members of congregations. One such committed member at Alliance congregational partner Greenwood Forest Baptist Church in Cary, N.C. – Gilles Bikindou – was handcuffed and detained by United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officials on Jan. 9 during a routine check-in. That, we believe, is unacceptable.

Gilles, a member of Greenwood Forest since March 2006, is law abiding, compliant with all requirements of immigration officials, a productive worker, a devoted Sunday school member and a regular worshipper at the church. He also has been in the process of pursuing political asylum. Gilles fled the Democratic Republic of Congo after witnessing state-sponsored violence and murder in his role as a civil servant, and because of his refusal to perjure himself in a public trial.

With his request for asylum denied and fearful that Gilles would need shelter from deportation, Greenwood Forest Baptist Church authorized senior pastor Lauren Efird at its November 2017 business session to declare the church a sanctuary for him. However, before Gilles could enter sanctuary inside the church walls, an ICE official at a regularly scheduled check-in appointment detained him. Associate Pastor Wes Spears Newsome accompanied Gilles.

After he submitted his stay of removal application and the processing fee, Gilles was detained by ICE officers, who proceeded to transport him to a Georgia detention center. He was never informed of the status of his request for a stay of removal.

Among the issues at hand is the fact that Gilles has life-threatening health issues, and it is unknown whether he will receive the care needed while at the Stewart Detention Center, a private, for-profit facility located in Lumpkin, Ga. The situation at Stewart is so troublesome that even the inspector general of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security has said they have identified “problems that undermine the protection of detainees’ rights, their humane treatment, and the provision of a safe and healthy environment.”

Greenwood Forest Baptist Church laments the actions taken again Gilles Bikindou. “We take the human-made rules of our land more seriously than the gospel command to love our neighbor,” Lauren Efird said in a press release. “Jesus calls us to preserve our neighbor’s life as if it were our own.”

The church is calling on the larger Alliance family to join them in prayer and action advocating for a stay of deportation and legal status for Gilles. This is, in essence, a plea for his life.

Since 2010 the Alliance of Baptists has repeatedly gone on record advocating for legislation that is just, humane, equitable and comprehensive for immigrants, refugees and other displaced persons living in the U.S. Speaking out against the notion that immigrants are a threat to national

security¹, we decry the unjust actions recently taken against these faithful church members and others threatened with deportation. They are ordinary people living here because of life-threatening adversity who are in need our compassion, our protection and our justice-love.

Sadly, Greenwood Forest Baptist Church is not the only congregation experiencing such an attack because of national policies. Congregational partner Judson Memorial Church in New York City is seeking intervention and advocacy on behalf of church member Jean Montrevil to keep him from being deported.

Calvary Baptist Church in Washington, D.C. also has spoken out with grave concern for its numerous Salvadoran members who are now threatened by the ending of their temporary protective status.

The Alliance of Baptists will do everything in its power to support those impacted by our nation's unjust policies, including acting and speaking out in defense of the stranger, the sojourner—our most vulnerable neighbors.

Other Alliance congregational partners that have decided or are discerning whether to serve as sanctuary spaces for those threatened with deportation include Calvary Baptist Church in Washington, D.C.; Lakeshore Avenue Baptist Church in Oakland, Calif.; Oakhurst Baptist Church in Decatur, Ga.; Old Cambridge Baptist Church in Cambridge, Mass.; and Pullen Memorial Baptist Church in Raleigh, N.C.²

¹ *A Statement on Protecting Welcome, Restoring Hope for Immigrants and Refugees, adopted April 2017*

² *If your congregation would like to be included in this list, please write paula@allianceofbaptists.org with the contact information for the coordinator of your congregation's sanctuary efforts.*