

Student Pastor Deported After Seeking Asylum in US

Despite prayer vigils, a letter-writing campaign from her church and her denomination and a petition for a stay of removal from her lawyers, a student pastor was deported this week in what the head of the mainline Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is calling “an egregious case once again of family separation.”

Betty Rendón, who fled with her family from Colombia during the country’s civil war, was arrested by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials on May 8 after her application for asylum was rejected more than a decade earlier.

Another, last-minute application to stop her deportation was denied Friday (May 24), the National Immigrant Justice Center confirmed.

Rendón and her husband, Carlos Hincapié, were transported to Louisiana over Memorial Day weekend before being put on a plane to Colombia on Tuesday morning, according to the center.

ICE could not immediately be reached for comment.

Rendón had been studying at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago and commuting from the city to Racine, Wis., to work part time as a lay minister at Emaus ELCA Church. She had been working mostly with the Spanish speakers in the bilingual congregation – leading worship and performing baptisms and quinceañeras, according to the Rev. Marcy Wieties of Emaus.

Wieties said the student pastor was “most definitely” needed at the church and “very well loved.”

“There are a lot of people who are very hurt, very angry, feeling the loss,” she said.

Rendón and Carlos Hincapié's daughter, Paula Hincapié, had been pulled over and taken into custody by ICE agents earlier this month as she was driving her 5-year-old daughter to school, according to a post on Emaus' website. The agents then arrested her mother and father, as well as another relative who had been staying with them at the family home, nearby.

Paula Hincapié later was released, as she is protected from deportation by the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, or DACA. However, because of her DACA status, she now cannot leave the U.S. to visit her parents. Her daughter is a U.S. citizen.

"They are separating our family," Paula Hincapié said at a rally last week outside ICE's Chicago field office, according to a press release by the National Immigrant Justice Center, which represented Rendón and Carlos Hincapié.

"Our family has always been together. I feel totally alone. My parents are my main support as a single mother."

The National Immigrant Justice Center filed an application with ICE last week seeking to stop the deportations for Rendón and Carlos Hincapié, the center confirmed. More than 65 organizations submitted letters of support through Emaus, and Milwaukee-based Voces de La Frontera launched an online petition calling for the couple's release, according to the center's press release.

Prayer vigils were held Tuesday at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, at Emaus and in Louisiana, according to ELCA Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton.

In Chicago, Eaton said, "we sang hymns and we prayed and listened to Scripture and wept with this young woman and her little daughter who are now separated from their parents."

Several of the city's aldermen and Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle, who recently lost a runoff election for

mayor of Chicago, also attended the vigil, according to the bishop. They spoke about the need to fix an “incredibly broken immigration system in this country,” she said.

“You have a middle-aged religious worker who is preaching the gospel and somehow is considered a threat and deported immediately. So that’s really distressing,” Eaton said.

Rendón and her family had fled Colombia in 2004 when guerrillas threatened the school she directed there, according to accounts shared by the National Immigrant Justice Center and Emaus. Her application for asylum in the U.S. was rejected in 2008 because there was no police report documenting the attack, and she had exhausted her appeals.

Eaton said the ELCA, one of the five largest Protestant denominations in the U.S., is reaching out to the Lutheran Church in Colombia to see how it can connect with Rendón there.

“The people in the church in Colombia say they have not recovered from their civil war – that it’s still a dangerous place,” she said.

Meantime at Emaus, the church is accepting donations through its good Samaritan fund to help Rendón and her family, including her daughter and granddaughter left in the U.S. without a support system, Wieties said. It already has raised about \$6,000, she said.

And that extends beyond helping Rendón and her family to helping all working through the U.S. immigration system, the pastor said.

“We’ve always traditionally been active in terms of advocacy – particularly at Emaus on the immigration issue because of who we are,” Wieties said. “But this has definitely brought it to a head.”

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