

Friends of the Center

What can I do for my friend? Can you help him?

It was one of those weeks. It began when I received a phone call from the director of the school that leases space at our church. She told me about one of their families. Marina and her husband, Igor, had spent seven years building a life in Decatur, Georgia with their four daughters.

Igor, who was born in Moldova, worked as a truck driver and had a pending asylum case. While hauling a load from California to Tennessee, he was stopped in Arkansas for an oversize-load violation. He was jailed, placed under an immigration detainer, and eventually transferred by ICE to the Winn Correctional Center in Louisiana.

Marina says Igor had a valid work permit and documentation of his pending asylum case. But suddenly the life they had spent seven years building began to completely unravel.

Igor was their primary source of income. Marina sold his truck and other possessions, applied for assistance for their children, and started a fundraiser. Families from the school surrounded them with support.

They couldn't free Igor. They couldn't take away the fear. But they could make sure Marina and her daughters did not face it alone.

And perhaps no one has expressed what this family is going through better than Marina's six-year-old daughter.

After hearing her mother explain that some people do not welcome immigrants, she said: "But if you are not welcome, I am not welcome."

That is just one family's story. And the calls just kept coming.

I received another call on Wednesday. This time it was from Caminar Latino, an organization that works with families experiencing domestic violence. They told me about a Guatemalan mother here in Atlanta with three minor children. Her husband is currently in jail on a domestic-violence charge. And now their mother has been arrested by ICE and transferred to a detention center in Louisiana.

Think about that for a moment. **Three children are suddenly without either parent.**

Sadly, their mother had never completed an emergency family plan; she probably never imagined she would need one. But now she's been denied bond and is now awaiting a court date before an immigration judge.



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Because the children were born in Guatemala, Caminar Latino is trying to obtain Guatemalan passports for them in case their mother is deported.

However right now, there are much more immediate questions:

Where will these children live?

Who will care for them?

Where will they go to school?

On Thursday morning, my phone rang again. This time it was my dear friend Santana. Santana was born in El Salvador and is now a United States citizen. He told me that a friend of his had called him who was very frightened.

Santana's friend has lived in this country for more than 30 years and even owns his own business. He has built a life here. But he's undocumented. And now he's afraid that the life he's spent more than 30 years building could disappear.

Santana called me because he didn't know what to do for his friend. And then he asked me two questions. They're questions that keep echoing in my mind:

"What can I do for my friend?"

"Can you help him?"

Many of us who work with our immigrant neighbors probably hear those same questions over and over: **What can I do for my friend? Can you help him?**

Every week, I receive calls from the immigrant support organizations with whom we work. They tell us about people who are so frightened that they're afraid to leave their homes even to buy groceries. So we organized teams of volunteers. Each team accompanies an immigrant individual or family. They bring groceries. They bring household supplies. They help with practical needs.

But what those volunteers are doing is so much more than just delivering food. **They are building relationships.** Because living isolated and afraid can become its own kind of detention. And so our volunteers want every person we accompany to know something very simple:

You are loved.

You have not been forgotten.

You are not alone.



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And still the calls kept coming. Each one a personal crisis that threatens to overwhelm an individual or an entire family.

That's when I got a call that threw my own church into crisis mode.

Anand and his wife are from Pakistan and have lived in our church for the past five years and are both greatly loved, not just by my congregation, but by so many other faith communities who have come to know them throughout Decatur.

Anand recently showed up for his regular ICE check-in where he was detained. The reason given was that he had been 30 minutes late for an appointment back in July. It was a blatant lie.

For five years, Anand has faithfully and dutifully been to every single ICE check-in. He's always followed the requirements placed upon him. He's never been in trouble with the law. He quietly goes about his life, working as a bus driver for an afternoon school program at a local church.

But two ICE officers met him at his latest check-in and escorted him away to be processed down at 160 Ted Turner Drive: Atlanta's notorious ICE headquarters. And by one o'clock the next morning, Anand was walking into Stewart Detention Center after a two-and-a-half-hour drive into the middle of nowhere in west central Georgia.

His attorney is now doing everything she can to seek his release. His wife is terrified that she may never see him again. The children at the school where he works can't understand what happened to Anand. And the people at our church who've known and loved him for five years are asking the same questions:

What can I do for my friend?

Can you help him?

I could keep going. There are so many more stories. Because the calls keep coming. The emails keep coming. The requests for help keep coming. And every one of these stories is part of a much larger story unfolding across our country.

But what truly breaks my heart is that our immigrant brothers and sisters in this country are being dehumanized by a cruel, oppressive, and unjust system.

They become numbers.

They become statistics.

They become categories: "Detainees." "Cases." "Undocumented immigrants." "Asylum seekers."



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And somewhere along the way, we lose sight of the human being behind those categories.

So maybe part of our work is simply this: We must keep putting the faces back into the story.

Igor has a face. Marina has a face. Their four daughters have faces.

Those three children suddenly without their parents have faces.

Santana's frightened friend has a face.

Jose has a face.

And behind every person who's detained, behind every person hiding in fear, behind every person facing deportation, there's another circle of people whose lives are being affected.

There's a spouse who cannot sleep.

A mother who is crying.

A father wondering where his child has been taken.

A daughter waiting for someone to come home.

A child wondering why someone they love has disappeared.

And that's why we are called to do something – to do anything to help our immigrant brothers and sisters because it does matter.

We may not be able to change the entire immigration system tomorrow. We cannot answer every phone call. We cannot solve every problem. We cannot keep every family together. But we can answer those questions:

What can I do for my friend? Can you help him?

We can accompany.

We can advocate.

We can bring food.

We can help families develop emergency plans.

We can connect people with lawyers.

We can visit detention centers.

We can show up at court hearings.

We can contact elected officials.

We can stand beside frightened families.

We can speak when others cannot speak for themselves.

And sometimes, perhaps the most important thing we can do is simply refuse to allow another human being to disappear.

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We can look another person in the eyes and say:

I see you

I know your name.

I know your story.

And I will not forget you.

Because somewhere tonight someone is sitting inside an immigration detention center.

Someone else is afraid to leave their home.

Someone is wondering whether it's safe to go to work tomorrow.

Someone is wondering whether going to an ICE check-in will mean never coming home again.

And somewhere else, someone is waiting for that person . . . because . . .

Someone loves them.

Someone misses them.

Someone is praying for them.

And they keep asking those questions:

What can I do for my friend?

Can you help him?

We are called to always remember that before anyone is an immigrant, before anyone is undocumented, before anyone is an asylum seeker, before anyone is a detainee, before anyone is a case number, **they are a human being.**

And for those of us who come to this work out of our faith, there's something more we dare to say:

Before anyone is an immigrant, documented or undocumented, they are a child of God—created with dignity, worthy of respect, deserving of justice, and called to a life of hope.

– Rev. Tom Hagood, Pastor

Columbia Presbyterian Church in Decatur, Georgia

Moderator of The New Sanctuary Movement of Atlanta

