

**Ep #6: ICE Enforcement and Christian Responses
to Immigration Detention**



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Hosts

Tracie L. Morgan & Ashley Glimasinski

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Tracie: When an immigration enforcement makes headlines, it's often because of the violence it leaves behind. Just last month in Los Angeles, a 79-year-old US citizen was slammed to the ground by ICE agents, left with broken ribs and a brain injury. That was during a raid where he wasn't even charged. And in New York, video shows an ICE officer shoving a woman into a wall and pushing her to the ground in front of her children at a courthouse.

While these aren't isolated incidents, I still believe in my heart that many officers are simply trying to do the right thing. Still though, these shocking actions are part of a larger pattern in how immigration enforcement is carried out in our country, one that raises painful questions about justice, dignity, and how we treat our neighbors.

Ashley: As Christians, we're called to wrestle with these realities. What does it mean to seek justice and show mercy when our government uses force in the name of law? How do we respond when those who bear God's image, citizens and immigrants alike, are treated with violence and fear?

Today, we're going to look at ICE, immigration enforcement, and what it means to bring a Christ-centered response into this conversation. Welcome to Hope in Action, where we offer clear insights, practical tools, and inspiring stories to navigate immigration with confidence, compassion, and faith. Each week, we break down the law, share real-world examples, and help you speak up, live out your values, and make a difference in your community.

Whether you're looking to understand immigration through a faith-driven lens, have courageous conversations with those who

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matter to you, or take small steps toward justice, you're in the right place. Let's dive in.

Hi, I'm Ashley Glimasinski, a community advocate, a friend of immigrants, and someone who cares about my neighbors.

Tracie: And I'm Tracie L. Morgan, an immigration attorney in Atlanta with over 15 years of experience. And just as a warning, today's topic could be triggering for some, so we advise caution for more sensitive listeners.

Ashley: So to get started, you've probably heard a lot of different agency names thrown around over the last year, and it can be confusing to know who does what. So let's break down some of who they are and what they do.

So this is an analogy that a border patrol agent told me when I was at the border a couple of years ago. And just a note that because it was a border patrol agent, this analogy may not be the most perfect one and it does have some bias in it. But I think it's a helpful framework as we think about how do these agencies work together.

So the agent told me that our country is like a house, and the Department of Homeland Security, or DHS, is the security system. That security system focuses on national security and the threats, both present and potential, that our country, or house, could face. And it's made up of a few different agencies.

One is USCIS, one that we've mentioned before, the US Citizenship and Immigration Services. This acts as a gatekeeper that controls

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who gets to enter and stay in the house through legal channels such as visas, green cards, and naturalization.

Border patrol is like the fence. Their main job is to stop unauthorized people from getting inside the property while facilitating lawful international travel and trade through official ports of entry. So they're like the gate and the front door to the house.

Customs and Border Protection acts as the fence gate and the house door. Everyone who enters the house should come through these ports of entry. And ICE is the security inside the house, responsible for finding and removing individuals who are already inside the home without permission. And again, this is just an analogy, but it's maybe not the perfect analogy. There are some arguments against it, but I hope that gives you a helpful framework for understanding how all these agencies work together to protect the United States.

Tracie: So that is helpful, but I want to break it down a bit more with ICE since that's going to be our main topic of conversation today. When we talk about immigration enforcement, it helps to understand what ICE actually does. ICE, or Immigration and Customs Enforcement, is a federal agency whose job it is to enforce US immigration laws. That means they identify people who may be in the country without legal authorization or have broken certain immigration rules.

However, and we'll talk more about this, most of the people that they're detaining are not violent criminals. ICE also investigates crimes connected to immigration like human trafficking or fraud.

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And there are some really great officers at ICE who are working on breaking up human trafficking rings and they do amazing work.

Here's how the process usually works. First, ICE identifies someone, sometimes at home, work, or even in court that they are interested in. Then that person may be arrested and taken to a detention center, a secure facility where they go to wait while their immigration case moves forward.

In detention, they go through processing, which can include medical checks and providing information about their case, but access to lawyers or legal information is often pretty limited. And then finally, there's a hearing before an immigration judge. The judge decides if the person can stay in the US, if they qualify for certain types of relief, or if the person must be deported. Some people might be released on bond while waiting for their case to move forward, but many remain in detention.

Ashley: So there are often a lot of misunderstandings about how enforcement and detention are actually carried out. For example, like Tracie said, most people detained are not criminals. ICE often detains people for immigration violations, not violent or dangerous crimes. Many have no criminal record at all and that might surprise you. Currently, 70% of the people detained do not have a criminal conviction.

And for comparison, in 2023, only 57% of people detained by ICE had no criminal convictions or pending charges. That's a really big increase in how many people we've seen who are detained who don't have a criminal conviction.

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Also, detention is not trial or punishment. Being in an ICE detention center doesn't mean someone has been convicted of anything. It's an administrative process while their immigration case is pending. It would be like staying in jail while your speeding ticket is being decided. And how many of us have one of those? Do you think you should spend the entire time it takes to figure out what you actually owe or if it was actually you who was speeding? Do you think you should stay in detention for that time? It seems like a big jump.

And also people can be arrested anywhere, even in court or at home. Many assume ICE only acts after a court order or criminal conviction, but arrests can happen at workplaces, schools, or courthouses. We've even seen people arrested at churches, a place where we think should be counted as sanctuary.

And also, family and community impact from detentions and enforcement is massive. Detention can separate parents from children, disrupt their schooling, and also create trauma, even for US citizens or legal residents who are caught in enforcement errors.

While we might think that US citizens and legal residents would be safe or exempt from arrest and detainment by ICE, in the past year, there have been multiple incidents of this happening. For example, in October 2025, a US citizen filed a lawsuit against the federal government for being detained while at work, twice. He was detained while he was at work twice by ICE.

What do we say to that? US citizens, we feel, should be exempt from these enforcement operations, but the reality is they're not. And also, access to basic rights is limited in all these situations of

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enforcement and detention. In immigration detention, for example, detainees often face overcrowded facilities, limited medical care, and restricted access to legal representation, which can make navigating the system extremely difficult. As we mentioned in a previous episode, immigrants who are detained are not appointed an attorney to argue their case, not like a US citizen who is detained and appointed an attorney. It's really different in the immigrant system. So immigrants have to find and pay for an attorney on their own if they wish to be represented in court or in the proceedings of their case.

So as we think about detention centers, Tracie, I haven't been to a detention center. I think you have. Can you tell us some of that story?

Tracie: Absolutely. I haven't been for a few years, just to be perfectly up front about that, but certainly when I began my practice, I was going to detention centers to meet with clients and potential clients pretty often. And in Georgia, we have a few detention centers, but the main one I want to talk about is the Stewart Detention Center in southern Georgia. Again, it's been a few years since I drove down there, but I can still picture it like it was yesterday.

The drive itself is almost peaceful. You're going through rural areas, rolling countryside, and then when you hit Lumpkin, which is the county and the city where the Stewart Detention Center is, you see one lonely stoplight, one little barbecue place on the corner, and then you turn and out of nowhere, it's this giant warehouse surrounded by layers of barbed wire, signs everywhere about

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entering a secure area. And you can definitely tell you've entered someplace different.

And so, once you arrive, you park, you go inside, you go through different security checkpoints. Everything you bring in is checked, and even what you wear matters. No high heels, no large purses, and for the ladies, no underwire in your bra. It's an intimidating moment when you walk through those gates and you're going to go and see a client who's detained.

Ashley: And Stewart isn't just any detention center, right? It's actually kind of notorious because it's the ICE facility with the most deaths. I think it's like 13 since they opened in 2006. And deaths on our watch should never be acceptable, but 13 especially is really concerning. And I've heard that the conditions inside are really concerning as well, that people talk about being denied basic medical care. Like they're missing their medications, they're getting ibuprofen when they really need an ambulance. And also there are stories of food contaminated with bugs or hair, and even people going without soap. I think that's the same place, right?

Yeah. So I think that makes it even harder to process is that the people there are not criminals, right? We would not expect that kind of care for criminals even, but these people especially are not criminals. They may have violated immigration laws, but they don't pose a threat to our communities. And yet they're still being held in conditions that are shocking and dehumanizing.

Tracie: It's so true. We've heard the stories from like alligator Alcatraz and the same thing, horrible conditions, overcrowding, maggots in the food. And because of all of this, there's been litigation to close the detention center. There are some standards

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that get put in place, but members of Congress really aren't allowed to go without having provided notice to the detention center that they're going. And so it's just really hard to make sure that people are being cared for the way that they ought to be.

And so, I know that when I would drive away from Stewart or Irwin, the other detention center that we had here in Georgia, it's really hard to stop thinking about the families, the men and women who are behind those fences. You see the conditions that they're in, you kind of see over prolonged visits, kind of the hope start to fade because people are put in these detention centers, sometimes with the hope that they're just going to give up their case and agree to self-deport.

And this haunts me because you're thinking about how far removed their lives are from ours. But they're right there. They were in our community maybe just the day before, and now they're detained. And just another note, this detention center is about a three-and-a-half-hour drive from Atlanta, so that also makes having legal representation really hard because I could probably count on two fingers the number of attorneys, immigration attorneys, who are down around the Stewart Detention Center. So just another thing that makes life difficult.

Ashley: You're right, Tracie. I think it does feel like it's on purpose that it's physically in a place that is hard to get to, which makes representation difficult, which means it's difficult for them to see people even, for encouragement, for family and friends to visit. Oftentimes immigrants are moved to detention centers that are not even in the state where their family lives. So it's hard for them to have that connection and the human connection even that

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makes it possible for them to maintain hope, to think that there's a chance I might one day see light again. I may one day go out of these walls and back to my family. So I think it is, it's demoralizing and it's really hard to see for me as a Christian to think that people are losing hope.

And I think again, what can we do as Christians in this case? How does our faith guide us when we're confronted with a system like this that causes so much suffering?

Tracie: It's a really great question. And I think that scripture gives us three really clear principles: mercy, justice, and hospitality.

Ashley: That's right. And we're going to start with mercy, actually. Mercy is seeing people as God sees them. Every person is created in His image. Mercy doesn't excuse mistakes, but it does remind us that no one deserves to be treated without dignity. And it's important that we also remember that dignity and the image of God in others isn't determined by their paperwork or legal status. It's inherent and God-given. Pastor Benjamin Kramer says that when we reduce human beings to categories like illegal or criminal or alien, it erases the image of God in them and turns them into a mere object, an object that can then be removed, detained, or coerced. And that's a theological violence, according to Pastor Kramer. And I think it is. It's important that we use these terms that are humanizing, not dehumanizing. When we place people as objects as criminal, alien, or other, it's easy to say, well, they're not human, so I can get away with doing these things.

Tracie: Terminology so matters in this line of work for sure. And then I want to talk about justice. Big surprise coming from the lawyer, I know. But justice takes us all a step further. In Micah 6:8,

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we hear the verse, "Do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God." Justice is about more than punishment, it's about fairness and right relationships. It means that we have to ask hard questions about detention, about policies, about conditions that strip away dignity. Justice demands that we advocate for change.

Ashley: And then there's hospitality. Hebrews 13:2 tells us, "Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing, some have entertained angels without knowing it." Hospitality is about creating safety, welcome, and belonging. It's not passive, it's active. It's showing up for people who feel unseen.

Tracie: And so when we put these three things together, we get a picture of how faith shapes our response. Mercy calls us to compassion, justice calls us to advocacy, and hospitality calls us to welcome. And when we live that out, we're not just talking about faith, we're practicing it.

Ashley: But it's not just inside detention centers where harm happens. It's also in the way ICE carries out arrests, and sometimes those arrests are violent. Let's think about the examples we provided when we started this episode.

Tracie: Exactly. And this is definitely going to be more of an issue. We see people with their phones out recording every single incident and that's amazing, that's great for accountability. But one of those examples we talked about in the beginning was that case in New York where ICE agents tried to arrest a woman outside of immigration court. Court is supposed to be a safe place, a place where people can exercise their legal rights. And instead, it really has become a place of fear.

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Ashley: And then there's the story of the 79-year-old US citizen who was tackled roughly during an ICE operation, and he suffered a traumatic brain injury. Think about that for a moment. A man who was almost 80, a US citizen, and now he's injured for life. That's not just enforcement, that's actually violence.

Tracie: And when we see that, we have to ask, what does our faith say? Jesus reminds us that every person has value and dignity. So when someone is hurt or treated with such cruelty, it's not just a policy program, it's a spiritual problem.

Ashley: And mercy compels us to care about the people who are harmed. Justice calls us to question why arrests are carried out this way. And then how the system can be changed. And hospitality challenges us to create safe spaces, especially for those who are most vulnerable.

Tracie: And clearly, this isn't abstract. When people are afraid to go to court or to the doctor or even to church because ICE might be waiting for them, that should matter to us as Christians. Because Jesus himself was once a refugee, and he tells us that what we do for the least of these, we do for him.

Ashley: So the question we're left with after considering these things is, will we look away or will we act? Will we choose silence or will we let our faith push us to mercy, to justice, and to hospitality?

Tracie: And friends, certainly these are hard conversations. It's heavy, but it's necessary because our faith doesn't allow us to be indifferent.

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Ashley: We hope our conversation today has given you space to reflect, to wrestle, and to maybe think about how you can take a small step, whether that's learning more, speaking up, or simply showing hospitality to someone in your community.

Tracie: Together, we can live out the gospel by caring for the vulnerable, challenging what's unjust, and choosing love in the face of fear. We do this through showing hospitality, mercy, and justice.

Ashley: And hospitality is something you can practice right in your community wherever you are. You can volunteer with local immigrant ministries, an ESL program, or a community center. And sometimes it's as simple as sharing a meal with an immigrant neighbor or offering a ride to someone who needs help getting to an appointment. That's always really helpful, actually. As we talked about, it's hard to get around the United States without a car or a driver's license, and taking the bus can take you hours out of your way. So offering little things like that may seem insignificant for you, maybe it's only 10 minutes out of your day, it can actually be really helpful for others and shows a hospitable, welcoming spirit to people who are new in our community.

So hospitality is about building those relationships. Slowly over time, you start with something small and you get to know the people and their stories and make sure that the welcoming space, like we said, is created for everyone.

Tracie: And then mercy has us take action, do direct support. And that might mean donating to groups that serve immigrants in detention. That can be providing commissary funds for hygiene supplies or phone calls at places like Stewart. There are some

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organizations like El Refugio here in Georgia that coordinate visits, provide an actual house for people to stay when they go to visit their loved ones at detention, and they'll do letter writing opportunities to remind people that they're not forgotten. I think that's so important because you lose hope when you feel like nobody cares.

And I would also just recommend to check your language. And I don't mean about four letter words or anything like that, but start to think about using humane language when it comes to talking about immigrants. Yes, the Immigration and Nationality Act, the law that controls immigration, talks about aliens. And that's such a word that creates division because it shows that they're not of us, right? But we're saying the opposite. We are actually saying that these are people made in God's image. They are sons and daughters of Christ, just like we are. And so using terminology like that really hurts, I think, the conversation moving forward. So refrain from using words like illegal or alien or criminal because again, we have learned that criminal is not always the right word to use when describing someone in detention. But we want to again focus on showing that these people are made in the image of God. So use words like immigrant, migrant, or the undocumented. Encourage others you speak with to use these dignifying terms instead.

Ashley: And then there's justice. This is about looking at the bigger picture and asking how we can change the systems that are causing suffering. That might mean calling your representatives about detention conditions, like the ones we talked about earlier where people don't have access to medication or even soap. You can also support campaigns for alternatives to detention, or you

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can actually go to a vigil that's being held outside a detention center if there's one near you. All of these actions mean justice. And justice means raising our voices for those who can't.

Tracie: And of course, we could never forget prayer. Pray for people in detention, for their families, and yes, even for the officers and the decision makers. Pray that God would soften hearts, open doors, and bring change.

Ashley: So whether you feel called to offer hospitality, to extend mercy, or to pursue justice, there is always a place for you in this work.

Tracie: Together, we can respond in ways that reflect Christ's heart with compassion, courage, and with hope.

Ashley: As we think about a conversation tip or small action that you can take with you this week, we want to leave you with some practical examples of ways that you can help shape some conversations that may come up around this topic. For example, you might be asked, I don't get why Christians care so much about immigration enforcement. I see the mass deportation now signs and I think, isn't that just following the law? That's a question you might get asked. And you can respond with, sure, laws matter, but our faith calls us to something more. It reminds us that every person is made in God's image. Mercy tells us to care for people who are vulnerable, and justice calls us to speak up when systems cause harm. So caring about enforcement isn't saying I'm okay with people breaking the law. It's about living our faith in real life.

Tracie: And if somebody says or has the question, well, they're catching all the criminals and making our streets, cities, and

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country safer, right? Well, you can gently share the statistic we mentioned earlier that 70% of currently detained immigrants don't have a criminal conviction. Immigration violations are not criminal. I can't say that enough, they are not criminal. One exception, reentry after a deportation order, so I'll put that little legal asterisk in there. But remember how we talked about in a previous episode, asylum seekers? We hear a lot in the news about asylum seekers being in the country illegally, crossing illegally, but seeking asylum is legal and someone has to be standing on US soil at the border to ask for it. That means that someone can cross the border between ports of entry with or without authorization, turn themselves into border patrol, and apply for asylum within one year of that crossing. There has been some legal back and forth on, you know, do you get special treatment if you go through a port of entry versus not, but regardless, seeking asylum is not criminal.

Someone also might say that these are just really difficult topics. I always say it's above my pay grade when something gets beyond me, but these are really hard topics and politicians need to try and solve them, but trying to solve them doesn't mean that it's political. So you can recognize this viewpoint and challenge it with, it can really feel political, right? All these laws, all the back and forth, but at its core, immigration, I think, is a moral issue. Our faith asks, how do we treat the least of these? Mercy, justice, and hospitality aren't optional. They guide us to care for people, speak against harm, and to welcome the stranger, even when it's hard or inconvenient. And that's not political.

Ashley: That's so right. So we've talked about some different conversation steps you can take this week. And here's a small action that you can take. Tracie mentioned earlier about prayer.

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You can pray for the detainees. Pray for their strength and comfort. We've heard that detention can be a really dehumanizing and hopeless place. So pray that they feel God's presence and know that they're not alone. Detainment, like we said, is dehumanizing for many of the reasons that we listed previously.

And another action step that Tracie also briefly mentioned that you might consider is writing letters to immigrants in detention. If you know an immigrant who has been detained, you can write to them by finding their address of the detention center, which is available on the official US ICE website. And you can address the envelope with their name and their A number, which is the unique number assigned to every immigrant. Sort of like a social security number for US citizens, but it's a unique number that you would need to be able to send them a letter in detention. And each detention center has different requirements for mail, so make sure you read their website closely so your letter isn't returned to you. And these letters can be good to send if you know an immigrant in detention. They give hope.

But if you don't know an immigrant in detention, you may wonder, how do I find an immigrant to send a letter to? And there are several organizations that can run pen pal programs and need volunteers. Tracie mentioned the one in Atlanta, El Refugio, that can match you with a pen pal who's in detention. There's also another organization called Casa de Paz and also VIDA, V-I-D-A, and those are two amazing organizations that will match volunteers who want to write detainees who would like to have a pen pal.

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So what they do is they get detainees to fill out a form or someone who knows a detainee to fill out a form saying, I'm in detention and I would like a pen pal. Can someone please write to me? Here are the languages that I can read and write. And then Casa de Paz and VIDA and other programs like that have a list of volunteers who are outside of detention saying, I want to write to an immigrant in detention. How do I get involved? And then they'll match those two together so that they can be pen pals. And it's just a really great way of becoming a source of hope for people, maybe not a source of hope because our source of hope is in God. But it's a way of encouraging people, sometimes who are Christians as well. They're your Christian brothers and sisters to offer that hope and way of saying, I see you, I care about you.

And Casa de Paz shared this really great story with us about an immigrant who was in detention, and the volunteer got to visit him one day, and he asked the immigrant, do you prefer visits or do you prefer letters? And the immigrant said, I love seeing people. I love your visits, but really I prefer the letters because those are a source of hope for me when visitors are not here. And so he reads the letters at night before he goes to bed and in the morning when he wakes up. And that was just a beautiful way of saying, I see you. You're not alone in this place. So for that immigrant, the letters really made the difference between having hope and losing hope. And Cartas de Paz and Casa de Paz say that detention is an isolating experience. Our letters offer hope to people who often feel alone and forgotten. So these stories are important as we think, what can we do to help immigrants who are in detention? It's important to make sure they feel seen.

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Something else that you can do is you can pray for officers who work for ICE. Pray that their hearts are softened, that their decisions are guided by faith, and pray that they act with fairness, compassion, and integrity. Something that We Choose Welcome has started recently is an open letter to Department of Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem. And this letter is an open letter from people of faith, a lot of women of faith, saying that we see you as a Christian sister and we believe that we're called to the same standards of compassion and humane care for others who are also made in the image of God. And in this letter, we ask for higher standards of care for immigrants who are in detention, making sure that they do get their medications, making sure that they have access to an attorney.

Receiving proper care should be part of our detention system, whether someone is a criminal or not. So in this letter, we ask her to uphold these standards and to uphold the Christian value of the people who are held in detention as well. And it's interesting because in preparing to launch this open letter, I found myself using her name, Kristi, rather than DHS Secretary or Secretary Noem. And I found that it's personal and humanizing to call someone by their first name. And when I see the graphic that goes with the open letter, which is her official picture, and it says the words "Dear Kristi" across the top. And I'm reminded that Kristi is also human. She's also made in the image of God, just like my immigrant friends. And we've spent a lot of this season so far talking about how immigrants are made in the human image of God. But I think we sometimes forget that people in ICE, people in the government, our politicians, DHS Secretary Kristi Noem are also made in the image of God. And my wise friend and colleague at We Choose Welcome, Laura Hornby, she said of Secretary Noem

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that she and the administration aren't just dehumanizing immigrants, they're dehumanizing themselves in the process. When we label her and Trump as monsters, we just give them permission and the expectation to act like monsters. It's insisting on their humanity that lets us hold them accountable. So to hold them accountable, we also have to recognize them as being our brothers and sisters in Christ and seeing them made in the image of God.

Tracie: Something that I have struggled with, but it's just a good reminder. My pastor says, pray for your enemies. God says, pray for your enemies. And so President Trump is not my personal enemy, but I am certainly struggling with his policies, the process, things that are happening. And when I pray at night, I will say a prayer for him and for his heart to be softened, for him to gain an enlightenment when it comes to immigration. And my pastor says, this is great because it's hard to hate somebody that you're praying for. And hate is a strong word, but I have found myself maybe not changing my mind about the president's policies, but again, it brings him back to that human level and it is a struggle, but it is one small thing I can do to keep my heart soft, which is right, what we want for others to do as well.

And so prayer and action do absolutely go hand in hand. We have some amazing organizations listed at in our show notes if you feel called to take real steps or to simply learn more about this topic. There are organizations that focus on hospitality, others that focus on advocacy, and others that are faith-focused. There is a space for you in this work. I absolutely promise you.

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Ashley: If this episode resonated with you, we encourage you to share it with someone who may be struggling to reconcile their faith with their views on immigration. As we close, this is our very first season of Hope in Action. We hope you leave not just informed, but inspired, ready to live out mercy, pursue justice, and welcome the stranger in your own corner of the world.

Tracie: The stories we've shared remind us that faith isn't passive. Even with systems that feel overwhelming, every small action matters. Let your heart be compassionate, your voice be courageous, and your hands ready to act, because change begins with each of us.