

To: Members of Congress

Dear Members of the U.S. Senate and U.S. House of Representatives:

As leaders of religious congregations and faith-based organizations across the United States, we are united in grief over the tragic death of Kathryn Steinle. We are also troubled by the tenor of debate, as some are seeking to use this tragedy to paint both immigrants and community-policing practices as national threats. We implore all Members of Congress to not allow the politicization of this tragedy to punish entire communities for the actions of one individual. The faith community has a responsibility to defend individuals who are marginalized by society as we work for the common good of all. It is a moral outrage to see sensationalism shaping new forms of stereotypes and discrimination against immigrants.

The concept of *sanctuary* is rooted in an ancient and biblically-based tradition wherein communities of faith have provided safety and respite to individuals who have been cast out by society. The *Sanctuary Movement* that formed in the United States during the 1980s saved thousands of lives and helped convince the U.S. government to recognize the refugee status of Central Americans fleeing death squads. Around the same time, select cities declared themselves “sanctuary cities,” seeking to foster communities in which everyone feels safe, regardless of immigration status. Such policies do not, however, protect individuals from the criminal justice system, nor do they promote the release of individuals who have been convicted of serious offenses.

In the early 2000s, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) began implementing policies to force local police to serve as immigration enforcement officers through 287(g) agreements and the *Secure Communities* (SCOM) program. As implementation of these policies led to witnesses and victims of crime being deported -- including domestic violence survivors -- police departments saw a reduction in the reporting of crime. Recognizing that when local police are seen as immigration officers, immigrants are afraid to report crime, more than 320 jurisdictions across the United States have limited their collaboration with ICE. Due to this community pushback across the country, as well as federal rulings that ICE’s requests to detain individuals are unconstitutional without probable cause, SCOM was recently replaced by the Priority Enforcement Program.

Our congregations minister to people of all backgrounds, including individuals in the immigrant community who have witnessed and been victims of crime. It is vital for these individuals to know that they can go to the police for help, and for police to develop relationships with these communities. When all individuals can report dangerous situations without the fear of being deported and separated from their families, safety is increased for all community members. Policies that promote equal policing also help protect against racial profiling. We support the longstanding efforts that many cities and towns have made to foster trust between local law enforcement officers and all community members, regardless of their immigration status.

We are concerned that, in an attempt to respond to the tragic death of Kathryn Steinle, Congress will lose sight of the important role that community-based policing plays in establishing trust and cooperation between police and communities. We urge all Members of Congress to oppose legislation that would further criminalize undocumented immigrants or infringe on the rights of states, cities, localities and police departments to regulate how they interact with ICE.

We are committed to enacting policy reforms that improve our immigration system, and are against proposals that take us backward. Together, we stand ready to work with members of both chambers on immigration reform that provides opportunities for full citizenship, rather than punitive policies that harm communities.

Sincerely,

Sister Rosemarie Abate
Sisters, Home Visitors of Mary

Sister Louise Alff
Franciscan Sister

Sister Sharon Altendorf
Union of the Sisters of the BVM - US Province

Sister Maria Manuela Amaral
Missionary Sisters of St. Charles

Reverend Noel Andersen

Reverend Clela Anderson
Union Avenue Christian Church

Sister Guadalupe Arciniega
Sisters of Loretto

Reverend Carroll Arkema
Service for Counseling

Sister Joan Arnold

Sister Mary Ann Azar
Daughters of Charity

Mary Baird
Poor Handmaids of Jesus Christ

Sister Therese Bangert
Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth

Reverend Kay Barckley
University Temple

Reverend Josefina Beecher
Episcopal Diocese of Olympia

Mary Bertolini
Associate of the Congregation of Divine Providence

Sister Elaine Betoncourt
Sisters of St Joseph/West Hartford

Pastor W. Michael Biklen
Musserville/San Pablo

Minister Gilford Bisjak
United Church of the Valley

Minister Steven Blinder
Church of the Holy Spirit Song

Carol Blythe
Calvary Baptist Church

Sister Joan Boberg
Divine providence

Mona Bomgaars
Harris

Sister Margaret Botch
Sisters of Providence

Sister Theresa Bowman
CDP

Sister Mary Brady
Sisters of Mercy

Sister Judith Brady, OP

Reverend Lora Brandis

Sister Helen Brennan
Sisters of Providence

Sister Rosemary Brennan, CSJ
Sisters of St. Joseph of Boston

Sister Pauline Bridegroom
Poor Handmaid of Jesus Christ

Nuala Briody
Daughters of Mary and Joseph

Reverend Judy Brock

Sister Joan Broan
Franciscan of Rochester Minnesota

Robert Brown
Havurah Shalom

Amber Bruce
Lighthouse Church

Cathy Brunner
Associate of the Congregation of Divine Providence

Sister Kathleen Bryant
Religious Sisters of Charity

Sister Janet Bucher
Sisters of Divine Providence

Grace Bunker
Casas Adobes, Congregational UCC

Sister Ann Catherine Burger
Congregation of St. Joseph

Sister Catherine Burke
Union Presentation Sisters

Sister Richard Mary Burke
Religious Sisters of Mercy

Sister Norine Burns
Adrian Dominican

Sister Mary Michael Burns
Sisters of Charity...Seton Hill

Reverend Grace Burson
Church of the Holy Spirit

Sister Donna Butler
Sisters of Providence

Sister Esther Calderon
Dominican Sisters of Peace

Deacon Judith Campbell
Bainbridge Community UCC

Sister Cathy Campbell
Sisters of Providence

Sister Carmella Campione
Congregation of Sisters of St. Joseph

Sister Cecilia Canales
Dominican Sisters of Mission San Jose

Reverend Paul Carlson
Our Savior's Lutheran Church

Sister Sharon Carpenter
Sharon Carpenter

Sister Mary Carr
Adrian Dominicans

Sister Janet Carr
Congregation of Divine Providence

Priest Jay Carrigan
Holy Cross

Reverend Luis-Alfredo Cartagena Zayas
Park Avenue Christian Church (DoC)/UCC

Brother Kevin Cawley
Edmund Rice Christian Brothers

Patricia Chappell
Pax Christi USA

Sister Patricia Chappell
Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur

Donna Chappell
Sisters of Providence

Minister Marilyn Chilcote
St John's Presbyterian, Berkley, CA

Sister Mary Brigid Clingman OP

Sister Benita Coffey, OSB
Benedictine Sisters of Chicago

Reverend CC Coltrain
Center for Spiritual Living Greater Dayton

Reverend Elizabeth Congdon
First Baptist

Father John Converset

Carol Cook
Sisters of charity, BVM

Sister Kathleen Coll
Sisters of St. Joseph, Philadelphia

Reverend Stephen Copley

Carmela Cordero

Sister Lupita Cordero

Dianne Crawford
Sisters of Providence

Reverend David Crump

Sister Mary Cullen
Adrian Dominicans

Sister Rose Cummins
Dominican Sisters of Peace

Sister Genevieve Cunningham

Priest Clem Davis
St. Bartholomew Parish

Sister Rosemary Davis
IHM - Immaculata, PA

Minister Barbara De Souza
1st Congregational River Falls. WI

Sister Patricia Decker
Red lodge community church

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Red lodge community church

Father John Deegan
Augustinians

Sister Dorothy Dempsey
Dominican of Adrian

Sister Paulanne Diebold
Sisters of Mercy of the Americas

Josal Diebold
St Stephen

Joyce Diltz

Laurine DiRocco

Timothy Dobbins
St. John the Evangelist Episcopal Church

Sister Karen Donahue, RSM

Pastor Gary Doupe

Lenore Dowling
Immaculate Heart Community

Sister Ginger Downey
Our Lady of Victory Missionary Sisters

Sister Eunice Drazba

Carole Dugan
Mercy Associate

Sister Betty Dunkel
Daughters of Charity

Reverend Anne Dunlap

Sister Lyn Dwyer
Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill

Sister JT Dwyer
Daughters of Charity

Reverend Linda Eastwood

Brother Harold Eccles
Xaverian Brothers

Sister Barbara Einloth
Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill

Sister Kathleen Erickson
Sisters of Mercy

Pam Ertel
St. Peter's

Alejandro Escoto
Iglesia Fundadora de la comunidad Metropolitana Los Angeles

Donna Esposito
Associate of the Congregation of Divine Providence

Sister Theresa Falkenstein
Congregation of Divine Providence

Minister Judith Fean
Saint Mary's College

Pastor Paul Feiertag

Theodore Fetter
UU Congregation of Princeton

Minister Maggie Finley
Christ Our Hope

Maura Fitzsimons Fitzsimons
Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary

Pat Fling

Sister Shawna Foley
Sisters of the Presentation

Alice Foltz
Wellspring United Church of Christ

Sister Maureen Foltz
Carmelites, Vedruna

Sister Mary Fornicola

Dorothy Foster
North Georgia Immigrant Justice Coordinator

Sister Annette Frey
Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill

Sister M Gagliano
Adrian Dominican Sisters

Sister Therese Galarneau
Poor Handmaids of Jesus Christ

Kathleen Gallagher
Sisters of Charity

Reverend Robert Galloway
Community of St. Ninian

Sister Christine Garcia
School Sisters of Notre Dame

Sister Elsa Garcia
Sisters of Divine Providence

Sister Patricia Gardner
Sisters of St. Francis

Sister Alice Gerdeman, CDP
Cong. of Divine Providence

Gerald R Gioglio, OFS
St. Francis de Sales Fraternity

Sister Mary Ellen Gondeck
Congregation of St. Joseph

Ailsa Gonzalez
First Christian Church

Reverend Sue Goodin

Father Jose Goopio

Sister Marilyn Gottemoelle
Institute of Sisters of Mercy Americas

Nancy Griffin

Sister Louise Grundish
Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill

Reverend John Guttermann
United Church of Christ New Brighton (MN)

Barbara Hagedorn
CDP

Sister Diane Haines
Mayflower UCc

Brother Gregory Halzen

Fred Hammond

Sister Colette Hanlon
Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill

Pastor Alison Harrington
Southside Presbyterian Church

Sister Karen Hartman, SFP
Franciscan Sisters of the Poor

David Hartsough
San Francsco Friends Meeting

Sister Mary Antonio Heaphy
PBVM

Lorene Heck, OP
Adrian Dominican Sisters

Reverend Kenneth Heintzelman
Shadow Rock

The Reverend Charles H Hensel
St Giles

Carmen Hernandez

Brother Steve Herro
St. Norbert Abbey

Reverend Christiane Heyde

Father Timothy J. Hickey, CSSp
Congregation of the Holy Spirit

James Hobart
First Unitarian Society- Chicago

Sister Marilyn Hoffman
Congregation of Divine Providence of Kentucky

Sister Catherine Holtkamp
Congregation of Divine Providence

Barbara Hood

Sister Ethel Howley
SSND

Sister Charlene Hudon
Sisters of Providence

Sister Patrice Hughes
Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill

Mary Jo Hummeldorf
Sisters of Divine Providencd

Deacon Jan Hunter
Westwood 1st Presbyterian Church

Janice Ihli
Union of the presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary

Mother Marie Ilch
St Aloysious

Sister Andrea Inkrott
Sisters of St. Francis

Sister Margaret M. Jacobs, CDP
Congregation of Divine Providence Melbourne, KY

Sister Francine Janousek
Union of PBVM

Sister Mary Jennings

Sister Susan Jenny

Lee Johnson
Westminster Presbyterian

Reverend Allan B. Jones

Reverend Janette Jorgensen

Shalom UCC

Reverend Robert Juarez
Cara Noble

Anita Jung
St. John XXIII IEC

Sister Rosemary Jung
Poor Handmaids of Jesus Christ

Norma Kacen
Sr. George's Episcopal Church Arlington, VA

Sister Joyce Kahle

Sister Rose Ann Kaiser

Mary Kaminski

N Kanhai
Grace UMC

Sister Bernadine Karge
Dominican Sisters of Sinsinawa, WI

Reverend Rosanna Kazanjian
Rosanna Kazanjian

Minister Robert Keller
Parsippany

Sister Kathleen Kelley
Poor Handmaids of Jesus Christ

Sister Ann Kendrick
Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur

Reverend Kenneth Kennon
Southside Presbyterian

Sister Peggy Kenny
Holy Spirit

Reverend Edward Kern

Sister Mary Kernan
Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill

Reverend Maureen Killoran
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Gainesville FL

Sister Martha Marie Kirbach

Sister Geraldine Klein
Sisters of the Holy Spirit

Sister Maria Klosowski
Sisters of Mercy

Reverend Harry Knox
Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice

Sister Marilyn Kofler, SP
Sisters of Providence

Sister Bernadette Kramer
Divine Providence

Sister Barbara Kuper
PHJC

Father Eugene Kutsch

Gladys Lane
Westminster

Sister Joan Lang

Rabbi Alan LaPayover
Reconstructionist Rabbinical College

Sister Martha Larsen
Sisters of Mercy

Sister Mary Lawrence
Sisters of Charity

Reverend wayne laws
Mountain View United Church

Sister Lourdes Leal
Congregation of Divine Providence

Sister Yvonne LeBlanc
Sisters of Providence

Sister Dorothy LeBlanc
Congregation of St. Joseph

Rosemarie LeClercq

Marcia Lee

SisterClare Lentz
Sisters of Providence

Sister Pat Leonard

Donald Levan
Bishop Alemany

Reverend Emily Lin
Chinese Community UMC

Sister Mary Lindenberger
Sisters of St. Francis

Judith Liteky
St. John of God

Sister Dominica Lo Bianco
Sisters of St. Francis of Philadelphia

Sister Mary Norbert Long
Sisters of Charity

Pastor Judy Longo
Seashore Mission

Reverend Mary Love
Crescent Hill Presbyterian Church

Sister Patricia Lowery
Medical Mission Sisters

Sister Marie Lucey
Sisters of St. Francis of Philadelphia

Sister Sheila Lynch
Daughters of Mary and Joseph

Minister Sandra Lyon

Diana Madoshi

Alberto Magana
Catedral de la Esperanza

Minister Leslie Malachi
African American Ministers In Action

Sister Ida Mae Marceau
Sisters of Providence

Pastor Lilton Marks
Fellowship United Church of Christ

Yvonne Marlier
Unitarian Society of Germantown

Janet Matthews
United Church of Rockville Centre

S.C. Maurin
Sophia in Trinity

Pastor Rev. Donald Maxhausen
Christ Lutheran

Jennifer McCabe
St. John's Episcopal Church

Sister Margaret McCabe
Daughters of Wisdom

Sister Nancy McCarthy

Brenda McCarthy
St. Michael's

Father Eli McCarthy
Conference of Major Superiors of Men

Sister Mary McCauley
Crossing Borders - Dubuque

Thomas McCoy

Reverend Jean McCusker

Sister Dale McDonald
Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary

Sister Mary Ellen McDonald OP
Grand Rapids Dominicans

Sister Emerita McGann
Divide Providence

Sister Donna McGartland
Sisters of St Francis

Brother Brian McLauchlin
Divine Word Missionaries

Reverend Liz McMaster
Church of the Larger Fellowship

Sister Kathleen McNulty
School Sisters of St. Francis

Sister Stephanie McReynolds
Sisters of St. Francis

Reverend Mark Meeks
Capitol Heights Presbyterian Church

Sister Lucy Megaro
Poor Handmaids of Jesus Christ

Sister Sr. Xiomara Mendez-Hernandez, OP
Dominican Sisters of Adrian, MI

Noe Mendoza

Sister Jean Menke
Sisters of Divine Providence

Rose Menke
CDP

Reverend Russell Meyer
St Paul Lutheran

Sister Stephanie Miller
Sisters of Mercy of the Americas

Sister Mary Louise Mitchell
Sisters of St. Joseph of Rochester

Sister Mary Joyce Moeller
Divine Providence

Father Juan Molina
Order of the Most Holy Trinity

Sister Mary Margaret Mooney
PRESENTATION

Father Terrence Moran
Sisters of Charity of Saint Elizabeth

Sister Kathlyn Mulcahy

Minister Kelvin Mulembe
Arlington Temple UMC

Father Richard Murphy

Sister Pat M. Murphy
Sisters of Mercy

Madeline Murphy
Christ Church

Sister Jo Murray
Sisters of the Holy Spirit and Mary Immaculate

Sister Frances Murray

Sister Anne-Louise Nadeau
Pax Christi USA

Sister Anne-Louise Nadeau
Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur

Father Alfonso Narvaez
St. Anne's

Reverend Elizabeth Nash
Heart of Texas Association

Marty Nelson
NE Baptist Church

Annie Neroda

Sister Agnese Neumann
Sisters of Mercy of the Americas

Reverend Brooke Newell
Potsdam United Methodist Church

Sister Marilyn Nickol
Congregation of St. Joseph

Sister Rose Therese, Louise Nolta
Holy Spirit Missionary Sisters

Sister Geraldine Nowak, osf
Sisters of St. Francis, Sylvania, OH

Sister Mary Helen O'Donnell
Sisters of Charity of Sreton Hill

Sister Margaret O'Rourke
Daughters of ary and Joseph

Reverend Jose Olagues
Grand Canyon Presbytery

Reverend Donna Olsen
All God's Children MCC

Pastor Chelsea Ortiz

Reverend David Ostendorf

Sister Mary Lou Palas
Seton Hill Sisters of Charity

Brother Ernest Paquet
Brothers of Christian Instruction

Father Dennis J. Parker
At. Stephen's Parish

Reverend Robert Pazmino
Andover Newton Theological School

Reverend John Peeters
Saint Patrick Parish

Sister Mary Ann Penner

Sister JoAnn Persch
Sisters of Mercy

Sister Patricia Peters

Poor Handmaids of Jesus Christ

Minister Mark Peters
Priests of the Sacred Heart

Priest Vincent Petersen
Conventual Franciscan Friars

Sister Joy Peterson
Presentation Sisters

Charles Pfeifer
Woburn UMC

Adrienne Plasse

Father Marty Pool
St. Francis in Exile

Sister Patricia Pora
Sisters of Mercy

Pastor Paige Porter-Buhl
Covenant Presbyterian Church

Priest Michael Potvin-Frost
St. Francis of Assisi Ministry

Michael Poulin

Sister Sr. Mary Price
Sisters of Charity

Sister Jocelyn Quijano

Sister Anna Raimon

Josefina Ramac
Sisters of Providence

Reverend Nancy Radclyffe

Mark Reedy

Sister Claire Regan
Sisters of Charity

Sister Jean Reimer
Sunday Assembly

Sister Ruth Reischman
Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth

Father Bill Rimmel

Sister Helen Renzelmann
Congregation of Sisters of St. Agnes (CSA)

Sister Judith Riese
Congregation of Divine Providence

Jeff Riddle

Minister Jerry Rivers
The vineyard church

Sister Rose Rizzo
Congregation of Divine Provid.

Merilie Robertson

Belinda Robinson
Temple UMC San Francisco, CA

Sister Veronica Roche
St. Joseph Pro Cathedral, Camden, NJ

Pastor T. Michael Rock
Robbinsdale UCC

Sister Ceil Roeger
Dominican Sisters of Houston

Reverend Cally Rogers-Witte

Dr. Marian Ronan
New York Theological Seminary

Reverend Nancy Rosas
Washington Park

Sister Tarcisia Roths
Adorers of the Blood of Christ

Mother Marguerite Rouleau
Sacred Heart Catholic Church

Mother Patricia Rumer
Ainsworth United Church of Christ

Sister Marlene Rust
Cong. Divine Providence

Reverend Lon Rycraft

Marte Samuelstuen

Minister Teresa Santillana
Berkeley UMC

Rabbi Jeffrey Saxe
Reform Movement Congregation

Sister Judith Schaeffer

Sister Jean Schafer
SDS

Grace Schmeersal
Divine Providence

Sister Sharon Schmitz
Sisters of Mercy

Sister Ann Scholz
Leadership Conference of Women Religious

Sister Katherine Schroeder

Colleen Seed

Deacon Stephen Serembe
St Anthony

Sister Annette Seubert
Sister of Providence

Sister Carita Shields
Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill

Reverend Joseph Shore-Goss
MCC/United Church of Christ in the Valley

Reverend Merle Showers
University United Methodist church

Sister Kathleen Siimpson

Brother John Skrodinsky, ST
Missionary Servants of the Most Holy Trinity

Sister Barbara Ann Smelko
Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill

Sister Colleen Smith
CDP

Sister Katherine Smith
Sisters of Providence

Sister Diane Smith
St. Joseph of Carondelet

Larry Smith
Live Oak UU Church

Barbara Smullen

Joan Spatti

Sister Rita Specht
Sisters of Mercy

Chris Spencer

Sister Alice St. Hilaire
Sisters of Providence

Donald Steele
First Presbyterian Church

Priest Robert Stiefel

Reverend Jerald Stinson

Reverend Sandra Strauss
Market Square Presbyterian Church

Sister Pat Sullivan

Sister RoseMary Sullivan
Congregation of Notre Dame

Sister Suzanne Susany
Sisters of St. Francis of the Neumann Communities

Reverend Laurie Sweigard
Central Baptist Church

Clark Taylor

Patricia Tenbrink
Associate of the Congregation of Divine Providence

Reverend Linda Theophilus
Emmanuel Lutheran Church

Sister Kathy Thill
Sisters of Mercy

Pierre Thompson
Shrine of the Sacred Heart

Jan Thompson
Unitarian Universalist Church of Las Cruces

Sister Sheilamarie Tobbe
Ursuline

Reverend Rebecca Tollefson
Broad St. Presbyterian Church

Reverend George Tolleson
UUCA

Reverend Tory Tojian
Founders MCC LA

Jose Tovar
Saint Agustin

Sister Consuelo Tovar
Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul

Minister John Trant
Mercy associate

Minister Donald Treadwell
Center for Spiritual Growth

Sister Rose Marie Tresp
Sisters of Mercy

Sister Mary Trippel
Poor Handmaids of Jesus Christ

Pastor Frederick Trost

Sister Carmela Trujillo
Sisters of Saint Francis

Joellen Tumas
Poor Handmaids of Jesus Christ

Reverend Marcia Tyriver
Episcopal Church of N. CA

Sister Donna Vaillancourt
Sisters of Mercy

Sister Janice Vanderneck
Sisters of Saint Joseph

Father Scott VanDerveer
St. Mary's Catholic Church

SisterCharlotte VanDyke
Sisters of Providence

Sister Margaret Verhoff

Reverend John Vertigan
United Church of Christ, Florida Conference

Louis Vitale, OFM
Franciscan Friars

Sister Anne Walch

Mary Walsh
DMJ

Father Mark Watson
Sacred Heart Catholic Church

Carol Waymire

Rabbi Simkha Y. Weintraub
Member of Kane Street Synagogue

Sister Bernadine Wessel
Adorers of the Blood of Christ

Reverend Charles West
Nassau Presbyterion Church

Pastor Graham West
Emmanuel Community

Mary Jo Whelan
Mercy

Sister Teresa White
Sisters of Providence

Pam White
Sisters of Providence

Sister Diana White
Sisters of St. Francis

Sister Virginia Wilkinson
Sisters of the Presentation

Reverend Sara Wohlleb

Reverend Charles Wolfe

Reverend Lois Ann Wolff
Albany Presbyterian

Sister Virginia Wolfzorn
Congregation of Divine Providence

Reverend D John Woodcock
Church of the Loving Shepherd

Reverend Rebecca Woods

Sister Coletta Wrasman
Poor Handmaids of Jesus Christ

Reverend Angela Wright
Beloved Community United Church of Christ

Scott Wright
Columban Center for Advocacy and Outreach

Reverend Ieva Zadina
Park Slope UMC

Minister Ruth Zemek
La Casa de Paz y Bien

Sister Mary Zrust
Sisters of the Living Word