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3 arrested after St. Paul church protest released from jail

The judge's order for release came Friday



Cities Church is seen in St. Paul, Minn. where activists shut down a service claiming the pastor was also working as an ICE agent, Monday, Jan. 19, 2026 in St. Paul, Minn. (AP Photo/Angelina Katsanis)



By **MARA H. GOTTFRIED** | mgottfried@pioneerpress.com | Pioneer Press

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Three people [arrested Thursday](#) after a [protest in a St. Paul church](#) were released from jail Friday.



Nekima Levy Armstrong, Chauntayl Allen and William Kelly (Courtesy of the Sherburne County Sheriff's Office)

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security called them “ringleaders” in a Friday press release.

They said it was Homeland Security Investigations and the FBI who arrested civil rights attorney Nekima Levy Armstrong, St. Paul School Board

member Chauntayl Allen and social media personality William Scott Kelly.

On Sunday, protesters disrupted services inside Cities Church on Summit Avenue, near Snelling Avenue, in St. Paul. They said the acting field office director for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement in Minnesota serves as a pastor at the church.

People in the group shouted “ICE out” and “Justice for Renee Good,” referring to the 37-year-old who was fatally shot by an ICE officer in Minneapolis earlier this month.

The Justice Department quickly opened a civil rights investigation.

Levy Armstrong and Allen were charged by criminal complaint with “conspiracy against rights secured by federal law, namely, the free exercise of religion at a place of religious worship secured by the FACE Act,” attorneys for the U.S. Department of Justice’s civil rights division wrote in a Thursday filing unsealed Friday.

The act, which stands for Freedom of Access to Clinic Entrances, applies to clinics providing reproductive health services, such as abortion clinics, and people “seeking to exercise the First Amendment right of religious freedom at a place of religious worship.”

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On the arrest warrants, federal Magistrate Judge Douglas Micko crossed out a portion of the FACE Act that says a person “by force or threat of force or by physical obstruction, intentionally injures, intimidates or interferes with or attempts to injure, intimidate or interfere” with people at a place of worship. He wrote there was not probable cause to charge them under that part of the act.

An affidavit in support of the criminal complaint, unsealed Friday, included the names of five other people, but they were redacted.

“I intend to identify and find every single person in that mob that interrupted that church service in that house of God, and bring them to justice, and that includes so-called journalists who participated in harassing Americans at worship,” said Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights Harmeet Dhillon on Newsmax Friday.

Prosecutors: 30-40 ‘agitators’ at church

The affidavit details that about 10:30 a.m. Sunday “a group of approximately 30-40 agitators, working together in a coordinated manner” entered Cities Church on Summit Avenue, near Snelling Avenue, in St. Paul, U.S. District Judge Laura Provinzino wrote of the document.

They “engaged in conduct that ‘disrupted the religious service and intimidated, harassed, oppressed, and terrorized the parishioners, including young children, and caused the service to be cut short and forced parishioners to flee the church out of a side door, which resulted in one female victim falling and suffering an injury.’

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their initial court appearances Thursday initially granted them release on  with potential victims or witnesses in the from Cities Church and no travel outside Minnesota without prior approval from their probation officers.

Prosecutors, however, made a motion to stay the release for further review, saying they might be flight risks, which Micko granted following appearances at the federal courthouse in downtown St. Paul on Thursday afternoon. Allen, Levy Armstrong and Kelly were sent to the Sherburne County jail.

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in jail

Levy Armstrong and Allen should be released from jail and they were early Friday afternoon. A magistrate judge in a separate ruling Friday said Kelly should be released on his own recognizance. He was released late afternoon.

For Levy Armstrong and Allen, prosecutors had argued there should be a detention hearing because the charge is a “crime of violence” or a felony that involves a minor victim, which Provinzino found not to be the case.

The second argument from prosecutors was that Levy Armstrong and Allen should be detained “because there is a serious risk” they “will flee.”

While federal agents were conducting surveillance on Levy Armstrong on Wednesday, they watched her coming and going from a hotel in downtown Minneapolis. They said they saw her make rolling stops through stop signs and drive the wrong way in the hotel’s alley, and argued “this behavior is ‘reckless’ and demonstrates ‘preparations to flee or relocate,’” Provinzino summarized of their argument.

Surveillance of Allen showed her carrying her duffle bags “suggesting movement of belongings consistent with temporary lodging or relocation,” the court document said. Prosecutors cited Allen’s “history of non-appearance in court.”

But their attorneys noted that both women are professionals — Levy Armstrong as a lawyer and Allen as an elected school board member — and said they were staying in hotels in the community where they live “because of the widespread dissemination of their home addresses and threats that they had received.”

Provinzino wrote that the prosecutors' "risk-of-flight evidence is simply speculative." For example, there's no evidence Levy Armstrong and Allen own homes abroad or outside of Minnesota or they "ever knowingly evaded law-enforcement officers," Provinzino wrote.

"Given the United States' focus on risk of flight," Provinzino wrote, she ordered that Levy Armstrong and Allen turn over their passports and said they should be released on their own recognizance.

FACE Act not usually used in this way, professor says

Federal prosecutors have "a couple of times attempted to use the FACE Act in circumstances somewhat similar to this, but this is really quite a stretch in comparison to the way the law was intended to be utilized," said Jessica West, Mitchell Hamline School of Law assistant professor.

In instances when the FACE Act has been used in religious circumstances, it's involved people physically blocking others from entering a house of worship, "but in circumstances involving a protest, under facts that are like this, absolutely not," said West, who is an expert on civil rights, activism and protest.

Attorney General Bondi wrote on X, formerly Twitter, on Thursday: "Our nation was settled and founded by people fleeing religious persecution. Religious freedom is the bedrock of this country. We will protect our pastors. We will protect our churches. We will protect Americans of faith."

But Jordan Kushner, an attorney representing Levy Armstrong, said Thursday that U.S. Attorney Pam Bondi and DHS Secretary Kristi Noem had called for the arrests just to celebrate them on social media.

"This doesn't happen in a legitimate prosecution," Kushner said. "These are officials making a political decision, and purposely making a political spectacle and a political circus out of the court system for their own purposes."

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