

A Statement of Conscience from Faith Leaders of Berks County

We speak as people of faith — pastors, priests, rabbis, imams, and ministers — rooted in communities across Berks County. We come from different traditions, but we share two common values: every human being carries inherent dignity, and people entrusted with power are accountable for how they use it.

We address this statement to the Berks County Prison Board. And we address it to our neighbors because what happens in our name belongs to all of us.

We are concerned about what is happening in our county.

As of June 2026, Berks County Prison has discharged 96 people to Immigration and Customs Enforcement. Ninety-six people — neighbors, workers, parents, members of our congregations — handed over because of a voluntary policy that has no legal obligation. This is a policy that our Prison Board chose, and it should choose to end it.

ICE is not a neutral law enforcement partner. It is an agency that holds people in conditions that violate basic standards of human decency. It is an agency that has denied elected officials — county commissioners, state and federal legislators — their legal right to inspect detention facilities under their jurisdiction. It is an agency under whose custody more than 50 people have died since January 2025. These are not abstractions. These are the consequences of collaboration.

We are witnessing real harm to our communities.

Unnecessary fear has taken root in Berks County. Families are afraid to drive. Parents are afraid to bring their children to school or to the doctor. Workers are afraid to appear in public. People who have lived among us for years are anxious about being apprehended by ICE.

This fear does not fall equally. It falls on the most vulnerable. And it spreads. When one family is torn apart, an entire community feels that no one is safe. Trust erodes. Neighborhoods fracture. The bonds that hold a community together are severed in an instant at a traffic stop, at a courthouse, at a prison gate.

We have seen this before in history and know how it ends. We will not be silent.

We call on the Berks County Prison Board to end their pipeline to ICE.

Our faith traditions compel us not to look away from suffering when we have the power to address it.

The Berks County Prison Board has built a cooperative relationship with ICE that goes beyond what federal law requires. The jail notifies ICE when people in its custody are foreign nationals. It holds people for ICE for 48 extra hours. It hands them over.

None of this is mandated. All of it is a choice, justified by an argument that it was necessary to keep \$290,000 in federal emergency funding.

We call on the Prison Board to end all voluntary cooperation with ICE. This means:

- Do not notify ICE about people in your custody

- Do not honor ICE detainer requests
- When a person has served their time, release them. Let them return to their lives, their families, their communities while due process continues.

This is not a negotiation about hours. There is no version of cooperation that is acceptable to us — not four hours, not one hour, not one phone call. The relationship must end.

To our elected officials we say this:

We believe you are people of conscience, and we are asking you to govern by our shared values. History will not remember the \$290,000. It will remember the 96 people. It will remember what you chose when you had the power to choose differently.

We are asking you to take a moral position. This is the time to change your mind, and we are here to support you in doing so. Stop the collaboration.

We, the undersigned faith leaders of Berks County, add our names to this statement as an act of conscience and a call to action.

*The Rev. David Duquette, Pennside Presbyterian Church

Alicia Wood, Trinity Lutheran Church Kutztown

Elsayed Elmarzouky, Islamic Center of Reading

*The Rev. John Cullinan, First Unitarian Universalist of Berks County

The Rev. Thomas F. Irwin, Jr.

*The Rev. Bonnie M. Oplinger, retired, Grace Lutheran Church, Shillington

Vicar Seth Noggle, Trinity Lutheran Church, Kutztown

*Jim Pirtle, Eppler's United Church of Christ

The Rev. Steve Ohnsman, Calvary United Church of Christ

*Pastor Robert Argot, Renewed Spirit Church

*The Rev. Mandy Miller, Memorial Church of the Holy Cross United Methodist

*The Rev. Jayme Babczak, Immanuel United Church of Christ

The Rev. Robert S. Turner, Community United Church of Christ, Reading

*The Rev. Megan Huesgen, Immanuel United Church of Christ

Monsignor Thomas J. Orsulak, St. Peter the Apostle Roman Catholic Church

The Rev. Fred S. Opalinski, Trinity Lutheran Church, Reading

*The Rev. Hans E. Becklin, Trinity Lutheran Church, Reading

*Deaconess Deborah Matern Graf, Trinity Lutheran Church, Reading

The Rev. Dr. Dennis S. Ritter, Zion's Evangelical Lutheran Church

The Rev. Bryce Wandrey, Christ Church (Episcopal)

Rabbi Ted Prosnitz, Keshet Zion Synagogue

*In attendance at Berks County Prison Board on August 12, 2026 to present this Statement