

# U.S. deporting Christian pastors

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Immigration rejects requests to stay when church leaders' visas expire

**FAITH UNDER FIRE**  
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U.S. immigration authorities have stepped up deportations, but rather than pursue illegal aliens, they have chosen to evict America's church ministers from the country instead.

Honesty could cost Christian pastor Keith Thomas his citizenship because he cooperated with immigration officials, disclosing two minor marijuana convictions he incurred when he was a young man in England 33 years ago.

Thomas, 53, is working without pay, fearing deportation from the U.S. and separation from his family. He was denied a green card based on convictions that were expunged in 1982. Thomas told WND he has documentation to prove his clean record since the 1975 conviction and that he has always been truthful with officials, but he doesn't understand why people who enter the country illegally are allowed to stay when he is facing the citizenship battle of his life.



Keith Thomas and wife, Sandy

"They've let 12 million illegals into the country, yet somebody has been doing some good, paying taxes, came in legally and has been married to an American for 27 years and has two American kids, and they're going to kick him out?" Thomas asked. "I told the truth. Nobody called me out on my past. If I had not even owned up to my record, the government would not have been able to find any of it."

## **Immigration troubles**

Thomas said his first conviction happened while he was working on a cruise liner in 1971 when he was only 17. He was charged with being knowingly concerned in the

importation of marijuana after his cabin mate saw some in his possession and told authorities he brought it into the country. Thomas said the second incident took place in 1975 when he was 21. Authorities charged him with allowing his premises to be used for the smoking of cannabis when a tenant in his home told authorities Thomas gave him permission to use drugs on the property, though he did not live in the house at the time.

"I came in on a five-year work visa, and I told them about my convictions," he said. "I was very honest and forthright with them all the way from the very beginning."

Thomas said he first sought residency in 1981 after marrying his American wife, but his request was denied.

"I voluntarily left after they denied me residency," he said. "I was told I had to leave, otherwise I'd be deported. So, I left."

*(Story continues below)*

### **Pastoring in the U.S.**

Thomas became a Christian in 1977, two years after his last marijuana conviction, and served as a senior pastor in England for several years. His wife became homesick in 1990, and he decided to apply for U.S. residency again. The second time, Thomas received a pastor's religious work visa that lasted five years. He accepted a position as a pastor at the 8,000-member Vineyard Community Church in Cincinnati, Ohio.

He received a paycheck while his work visa was active, but when it came time for the pastor to apply for a residency visa, also known as a green card, immigration authorities denied his application based on Thomas' disclosure of expunged marijuana convictions in England.

Thomas has asked for an appeal before an immigration judge to plead his case on several occasions, but his requests have fallen on deaf ears since September 2006.

"Finally, after much hassling of congressmen and people saying they'll talk to somebody, I get the notice to appear in December 2007," Thomas said. "The place where it says 'date' and 'time' said 'yet to be fixed.'"

Thomas said he cannot understand why immigration authorities will not set a date for him to appear before an immigration judge, though he speculates it could be a form of religious discrimination against people in the Christian ministry.

"Have you ever been told the government is going to take you to court, and then not give you a court date?" he asked. "It's ludicrous. I just can't believe I am going through this."

### **Family separation anxiety**



Thomas' daughter, Anna, married in May.

Meanwhile, his family lives in a state of flux, constantly wondering if Thomas will be deported.

"It is unbelievable because we're living day in and day out wondering if we are going to be here next month," he said. "Of course, there's always the threat that they could put me in jail. It's just been heartbreaking for us for years now, and I am still being penalized for a mistake I made when I was just a kid."

Thomas said it looks as if the convictions may be held against him for the rest of his life.

"They said my wife and kids can stay here and that it's just me," he said. "I love my wife and kids. The most heartbreaking thing of all is thinking that I may be on another continent where I can't see my grandkids."

The pastor said he would rather face incarceration than allow his wife and kids to continue worrying about what will happen to their family. He is pleading with authorities to make a fair decision on his future.

"Look, if you think I am such a bad character, stick me in prison for a year or two years," he said. "I'd much rather go to prison for a couple of years than have this kind of stress on my family, not knowing where we are going to live the rest of our days."

### **U.S. deportation of religious leaders**

Immigration authorities have also marked a Catholic priest for deportation to Ireland on July 1 after documentation errors left the 58-year-old missionary without paperwork he needed to remain in De Smet, S.D.

Cathal Gallagher arrived in South Dakota from Ireland 10 years ago and has since become a respected figure in his community. Now the state's top elected officials and parishioners are pleading with immigration authorities to reopen his case and allow him to remain in the country, the Argus Leader reported.

"I wouldn't want to stay in this country if you haven't blessed me with the right to be in this country," Gallagher told his home church in De Smet. "I won't be here as an illegal."

Gallagher served the church for 22 years in Japan before he was granted a religious visa in 1996 to work with alcohol addicts in Rochester, Minn. He was later invited to work with churches in South Dakota.

"I thought I was going to go back to Japan ... but then I fell in love with De Smet," he said. "It's a very simple way of life, a place where people are important. I never expected to find that in the United States."



Cathal Gallagher

Following his application for residency in 2001, Gallagher was informed in 2003 that he would receive his green card. However, it was later denied in February 2006. Lawyers hired by the Catholic Church spent two years fighting to have the decision reversed, but their efforts have been without success.

Authorities said the priest should expect a phone call from Citizenship and Immigration Services before Tuesday, June 17, but Gallagher said he is still waiting for it to come.