

Could God Be Leading Undocumented Immigrants to the US?

Miguel Martinez* sensed God leading him to come to the  U.S., but he didn't grasp why until late 2007. That fall, a month after a visiting evangelist prophesied that God would soon reveal the reason, a seizure exposed a tumor behind his eyeball. Doctors successfully removed it. "I enjoy not having headaches," said Martinez, a 29-year-old salesman. "I praise the Lord all the time."

His pastor, Javier Lopez*, believes if Martinez still lived in Brazil he would be dead. "Unless you prove you can pay or have insurance, which is very expensive, they won't admit you," he said. "People die in hospital hallways."

Although members of his Pentecostal church are delighted Martinez survived, he has another problem: he is undocumented. Several years ago Martinez overstayed a six-month tourist visa, leaving him often looking over his shoulder. "I'd like to become a citizen," said Martinez, who had hoped to apply for citizenship when former President George W. Bush proposed such a path in 2007. "I was going to do everything I could to start the process ... but I'm still waiting for Congress to pass immigration reform."

Illinois Rep. Luis Gutierrez proposed a new bill last December to create a method for people like Martinez to obtain legal status. And in March Republican Sen. Lindsey Graham and Democratic Sen. Charles Schumer outlined a reform plan that would create a "tough but fair" path to citizenship, a temporary worker program and tighter border controls. But it remains to be seen whether Congress will tackle the issue during an election year.

Although Christians remain divided on the issue, support for immigration reform is growing among churchgoers. Christians were among the 200,000 people calling for reform at the March for America rally in Washington, D.C., March 21. The Rev. Samuel Rodriguez, president of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference, spoke during the event, and Church on the Way senior pastor Jim Tolle and Galen Carey, director of government affairs for the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), attended.

The NAE says immigration reform is one of the major social issues of our day. "Evangelicals may have largely missed the civil rights battles of the 1960s, but we do not intend to repeat our mistake in 2010," Carey said.

The Rev. Luis Cortes Jr., president of Esperanza, a network of 12,000 churches and faith-based groups, said many of the 12 million illegal immigrants buck the system because it routinely takes 10 to 12 years for the federal government to process paperwork.

But what some call compassion others consider amnesty. "It's complicated," said one Christian activist who asked to remain anonymous. "What someone doesn't call amnesty is called amnesty by somebody else."

The conservative group Eagle Forum opposes Gutierrez's bill, claiming it rewards those who are breaking the law. "As Christians, we need to be concerned about what we're doing and protect the laws of our nation," said executive director Colleen Holmes.

However, Hispanic leaders say a system calling for admission of guilt, payment of fines and back taxes, and mastering English can be part of an orderly immigration process. "We look at things through the ... eyes of Christ," said Rodriguez, who also pastors an Assemblies of God church in Sacramento. "When we do it through the eyes of the Lamb, it is respecting

the rule of law [but] with eyes of compassion, mercy and grace.”

SPEAKING OUT ON IMMIGRATION

“We believe it is in our national interest to protect our borders, reunite families, admit legal immigrants and bring the undocumented onto the tax rolls. As Christians, we seek justice and mercy for those whom God has brought to our shores.”

National Association of Evangelicals

“Immigration reform is a bit more complex than Americans want to talk about. We need to have comprehensive immigration reform. We need to fix a system that takes years for someone to come into this country legally.”

Luis Cortes Jr., Esperanza USA

“Our nation’s ‘Golden Door’ to new arrivals should remain open, but to do so it must be hinged on a strong policy that guarantees respect for the law and national security.”

Family Research Council

“It concerns me when any issue is put forth and people say, ‘~This is the Christian view.’ I’ve heard statements that ‘you can’t be a devout follower of Christ and not support immigration reform.’ To me, that’s really upsetting and very sad.”

Colleen Holmes, Eagle Forum

“We will insist that Congress must include in its plan ... a path to citizenship or permanent legal residency only for illegal immigrants without criminal backgrounds who accept appropriate waiting periods and pay fines and back taxes.”