

How Obama's Promise to Hispanic Evangelicals Turned Out

President Obama addressed one of the nation's largest Hispanic Christian networks Friday morning, telling the group that he is committed to immigration reform that includes a way for illegal immigrants to become citizens.

During an address at the Esperanza National Hispanic Prayer Breakfast, Obama said the U.S. must "clarify" the status of millions of people currently in the U.S. illegally. "For those who wish to become citizens, we should require them to pay a penalty and pay taxes, learn English, go to the back of the line behind those who played by the rules," the president told delegates at the event. "That is the fair, practical and promising way forward, and that's what I'm committed to passing as president of the United States."

He added that U.S. borders must be strengthened to thwart illegal immigration and employers should not be permitted to exploit undocumented workers to drive down wages.

Obama's remarks came on the heels of renewed calls from evangelical leaders for Congress to pass comprehensive immigration reform. Earlier this month, Christians for Comprehensive Immigration Reform urged Congress to pass comprehensive immigration reform legislation this year and issued a new statement of reform principles that include securing U.S. borders, offering a pathway to citizenship and providing a guest-worker program that accommodates the number of applicants.

Among the signers of the document were Bishop Vashti McKenzie of the African Methodist Episcopal Church; Jim Wallis of Sojourners; and the Rev. Sammy Rodriguez, a Pentecostal

minister and president of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference.

"This is the year for comprehensive immigration reform," Rodriguez said. "The window is open in 2009. We understand the political realities of 2010 and pray that in 2009 you do not forget about ... [the] 12 million people living in the shadows."

During Esperanza's eighth annual conference last week, participants met with policymakers on Capitol Hill to address the needs of the Hispanic community, with immigration reform among the highest priorities.

"This year—especially, but not exclusively—one of the predominant concerns of the Hispanic community is the issue of immigration and the problems that ensue from a broken and imbalanced system," said a statement from Esperanza, which is led by the Rev. Luis Cortes Jr. "Capitol Hill visits are the platform on which the Hispanic church and community leaders will present their principles and position regarding the need for comprehensive immigration reform."

During immigration reform debates in 2006, many of the leading Christian groups took a "law-and-order" approach, arguing that Christians must respect the rule of law and lawbreakers must be punished. Others remained silent on the issue. But Rodriguez believes the sentiment is changing among evangelicals and that more prominent groups will support comprehensive immigration reform.

"We're going to see the leading evangelical organizations that did not take part affirming and committing themselves to immigration reform," he said.