

Pentecostal Pastor Meets With President Obama to Discuss Immigration Reform

Pentecostal pastor Samuel Rodriguez said Hispanic leaders who met with President Obama this week to discuss immigration reform left “re-energized” by his commitment to address the controversial topic this year.

“We walked out of the meeting revitalized to a degree, re-energized, understanding that this president will not surrender the issue of immigration reform for the sake of political expediency,” said Rodriguez, president of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference (NHCLC), a network of 25,000 congregations representing 16 million people.

Rodriguez, a California-based Assemblies of God minister, was the only evangelical at the president’s meeting Monday with leaders of some of the nation’s largest Hispanic activist and labor organizations, including the Service Employees International Union, the National Council of La Raza and the Roman Catholic Diocese of Tucson, Arizona.

Rodriguez and several of those leaders are expected to join President Obama Thursday when he addresses immigration reform during a speech in Washington, D.C. Rodriguez said he “wholeheartedly” expects it to be “the most significant speech the president has given on immigration reform” but was short on specifics.

President Obama championed immigration reform during his 2008 presidential campaign and said he would make it a priority if elected. He also spoke out against Arizona’s controversial law that requires law enforcement to question the immigration status of people suspected of being in the U.S. illegally.

But the prospect of passing comprehensive immigration reform looks bleak at a time when many in Congress are reluctant to wade into another politically divisive issue. Rodriguez said he is only mildly hopeful that Congress will take on the issue this year but was impressed by the president's resolve Monday.

"It would be politically advantageous for the president to put immigration to the side, focus on the BP spill, focus on other issues that are so important," Rodriguez said. "But this president insists, driven by principle, that this is a critical issue that needs to be addressed as expeditiously as possible."

He said though immigration legislation may seem dead in the water, other bills have been unexpectedly revived, namely the health care overhaul.

"It had its Lazarus moment," Rodriguez said. "If it can happen with health care, it can happen with immigration reform."

Enlisting lobbying support was part of the president's agenda Monday. But the group also discussed the political realities that have caused reform efforts to stall.

Rodriguez said President Obama's immigration reform agenda is "99.9 percent" in line with the NHCLC's, which includes securing U.S. borders, providing a legal path to citizenship, fining those who have entered the country illegally and deporting undocumented persons committing crimes.Â

In recent months, Rodriguez's plan has won support from such evangelical groups as the National Association of Evangelicals, Liberty University and the Freedom Federation, a diverse coalition of evangelical and charismatic organizations.

In May, charismatic ministers were among a cross-section of Christians to sign on to a statement with Rodriguez calling for a "just" immigration reform policy that would create a

legal path to citizenship without promoting amnesty.

The statement signed by Richard Land of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission; Bishop George McKinney, a member of the general board of the Church of God in Christ; and Lou Engle, founder of TheCall prayer movementâ€”drew criticism from some who said the leaders did not reflect the views of grassroots Christians.

“They don’t have their constituency with themâ€”and this is not a clear biblical mandate,” Alan Wisdom, vice president of research and programs at the Institute on Religion & Democracy, told OneNewsNow in May. “The Bible does not tell us what our immigration policy should be.”

Although many conservative Christian leaders have opposed President Obama’s political agenda, especially his efforts to pass health care reform, Rodriguez is optimistic he will not alienate evangelicals on immigration.

“He’s right on this issue because from a biblical worldview on this issue he is not an extremist,” Rodriguez said. “He’s really reconciling the rule of law with compassion for the stranger among us.”