

Pentecostals Join Call for 'Just' Immigration Policy

✖ A diverse group of Christian leaders is calling for an immigration reform policy that offers a legal path to citizenship but does not promote amnesty.

In a statement released Tuesday, the leaders—who range from Pentecostals to Southern Baptists and represent millions of constituents—said the nation must secure, not close, its borders then allow “the millions of undocumented and otherwise law-abiding persons living in our midst to come out of the shadows.”

The group said a “just, rational” policy would put undocumented persons on one of three paths: one that leads to earned legal citizenship or residency, one that leads to acquiring legal guest-worker status, or one that leads to deportation, which they said should be swift for undocumented felons.

“Let us be clear—an earned pathway to citizenship is not amnesty,” the leaders said. “We reject amnesty. And we ask those who label an earned pathway to citizenship as amnesty to stop politicizing this debate needlessly and to honestly acknowledge the difference.”

Signatories to the statement include: the Rev. Samuel Rodriguez, an Assemblies of God minister and president of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference; Richard Land, president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention; Bishop George McKinney, pastor of St. Stephen’s Cathedral Church of God in Christ and a member of his denomination’s general board; Mathew D. Staver, founder of Liberty Counsel; and Lou Engle, co-founder of TheCall prayer movement and TheCall to Conscience.

The leaders said immigration policy is a moral issue and criticized the federal government for the "crisis" sparked by Arizona's strict law authorizing law enforcement officers to question a person about his or her immigration status if there is "reasonable suspicion" the person is in the country illegally.

The Christian leaders said Arizona's law is not the wisest course of action because immigration is a federal responsibility but called the move "a symptom and a cry for help."

"The crisis the country is witnessing in Arizona over immigration is the result of a failed immigration policy at the federal level," the statement said. "Arizona lawmakers felt compelled to act because the federal government would not."

The leaders are part of a growing number of evangelicals who are calling for immigration reform. The National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), whose members include such denominations as the Assemblies of God and the International Pentecostal Holiness Church, approved a resolution last year saying it "is in our national interest to protect our borders, reunite families, admit legal immigrants and bring the undocumented onto the tax rolls."

"Evangelicals may have largely missed the civil rights battles of the 1960s, but we do not intend to repeat our mistake in 2010," Galen Carey, the NAE's director of government affairs, told *Charisma*.

The nation's largest Protestant body, the Southern Baptist Convention, also is on record as favoring reform under certain conditions. This spring its Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission issued a statement of principles for just immigration reform.

"One reason we prepared [this] document is it's part of our

contribution to moving this issue from debate to action that enables the nation's 12 million undocumented aliens to come out of the shadows," said Barrett Duke, vice president for public policy in its Washington, D.C. office.

In their statement Tuesday, the leaders said the pathway to earned citizenship or temporary residency should be subject to appropriate penalties, waiting periods and background checks. They said individuals seeking citizenship should demonstrate moral character, an embrace of American values, and a commitment to full participation in American society by understanding English and the rights and duties of citizenship.

They said America's success is largely due to its openness to new immigrants. "We have proven to the world that people from diverse backgrounds can come to America, live in peace with their neighbors, pursue their dreams and succeed," the leaders stated.

"We must always stand for the freedom that makes our shores the object of desire for people without hope," they added.