

US Evangelicals Demonstrate Support for Immigration Reform

Thou shalt compromise, at least on immigration reform.

That is the message being heard from some leading evangelicals in the United States. After decades of promoting traditionally conservative causes like opposition to abortion, many **evangelical leaders** are now wielding their formidable influence to persuade Republican lawmakers to back one of President Barack Obama's top priorities.

With Hispanic attendance at their churches rising, these evangelicals are among the loudest advocates of a U.S. **immigration reform**. A group of pastors has launched a 40-day campaign to have churchgoers pray, read Scripture passages about welcoming the stranger and lobby their members of Congress, many of them in the conservative South.

"We have pastors preach in pulpits to parishioners in Alabama, Georgia, Arkansas, Mississippi, Texas—in all the wonderful red states across America," that aiding immigrants, illegal or not, is a Christian duty, said Rev. Samuel Rodriguez, one of the country's most prominent Hispanic evangelicals.

While evangelicals have been a major force in Republican politics for years, Republican lawmakers will take some persuading to back the sort of immigration reform supported by **President Barack Obama**, which includes a "pathway" to citizenship for immigrants in the country illegally.

Conservatives in the Republican-controlled House of Representatives want to focus the debate initially on securing the border with Mexico and making sure illegal immigrants are not rewarded with an amnesty.

“Some of them don’t necessarily see or acknowledge the changing demographics or the electoral merits of passing immigration reform, but I do think that many of these religious leaders could push them in that direction by really referencing the humanitarian interest, or moral argument,” said Republican strategist Ford O’Connell.

Rodriguez and other pastors are speaking to members of Congress “on a daily basis” to ask them to legalize the status of 11 million undocumented immigrants.

Targeted lawmakers include Judiciary Committee Chairman Rep. Bob Goodlatte of Virginia, who chaired a House hearing on immigration last week, and Rep. Raul Labrador of Idaho – a leading Tea Party thinker on immigration.

Unlikely as it may have seemed at the height of the “culture wars” of the last two decades, these evangelicals are attempting to nudge Republicans to the center. The effort is well timed, coming as the Republican Party strives to improve its appeal to Hispanic voters who went solidly Democratic at 2012 elections.

“This is one area where social conservative input is extremely welcomed by the Republican Party,” said O’Connell.

Pastors are asking worshippers to email their lawmakers and tell them: “I am a Christian, a conservative and I vote. I want you to support immigration reform this year,” said Rodriguez.

Rare Bipartisan Foray

Support for an immigration overhaul among **Christian conservatives** has been growing over time. In 2011, the 16 million-member Southern Baptist Convention—the country’s largest Protestant body—called for “a just and compassionate path to legal status” for illegal immigrants while urging the government to secure U.S. borders.

A Public Religion Research Institute poll in 2010 showed white evangelicals support, by a margin of 2-1, an immigration reform that would allow illegal immigrants to become Americans.

After the election, a group of evangelical leaders signed a letter to Obama endorsing "a path toward legal status and/or citizenship" for **immigrants**. Among the signers was Tim Daly, president of the Focus on the Family ministry.

Immigration is providing a rare foray into bipartisanship for evangelical veterans of fights over gay marriage and abortion like lawyer Mathew Staver, vice president of Liberty University, founded by evangelical leader Jerry Falwell in Lynchburg, Virginia. Staver's Liberty Counsel group threatened to sue a Florida library in 2000 for promoting witchcraft by encouraging young people to read a Harry Potter novel.

As recently as last Nov. 8, Staver wrote on Liberty Counsel's website that Obama won re-election because, "Millions of Americans looked evil in the eye and adopted it."

But now he acknowledges that Obama deserves credit, along with the Republican head of the House Judiciary Committee and Senators from both sides of the aisle, for drawing up plans for an immigration overhaul.

"I think it is incumbent upon us to work together and I applaud the bipartisan committee in the Senate and I applaud the leadership of Bob Goodlatte," Staver said. "I applaud President Obama too, I just don't want to use this as a political ping pong."

But any talk of an alliance between the White House and evangelicals to win immigration reform is stretching it.

Christian conservatives strongly oppose a proposal by Obama to give spousal visas to same-sex foreign partners of American gays and lesbians. And evangelical leaders disagree among

themselves on whether to grant undocumented immigrants the full right to U.S. citizenship or allow them some other, more limited, legal status in the United States.

Neither option is acceptable to some conservative evangelicals, like Iowa pastor Cary Gordon who opposes loosening immigration laws and accuses his co-religionists of “unbiblical naivete.”

‘I Was a Stranger’

Much of the Christian case for helping illegal immigrants is based on stories of biblical “immigrants” like Abraham and Moses and passages such as Matthew 25:35: “I was a stranger and you invited me in.”

“The scriptures command us to take care of the immigrant. It’s not just one verse here or there, it’s a repeated command throughout the Biblical text,” said Matt Soerens of the World Relief organization, who lectures churches on immigration.

U.S. Representative Doug Collins, an Air Force Reserve chaplain, says hospitality to foreigners is fine but must be balanced with respect for immigration laws.

“Scripture also teaches very clearly that there is government and civil authority and that there is an understanding of rule of law,” said Republican Collins, who sits on the House Judiciary Committee.

He represents a strongly conservative district in Georgia which has seen a spike in undocumented workers in the poultry and construction industries and opposes giving illegal immigrants a path to citizenship.

The evangelicals’ pro-immigration passion reflects changes in the **conservative Christian movement** which, while still predominantly white, has taken on a Latin tinge.

Rodriguez, the pastor, who heads a U.S. Hispanic organization

with 40,000 member churches, gave a benediction at the Republican National Convention in Tampa last year.

While some two-thirds of U.S. Latinos are Catholic, Hispanics form the fastest-growing group in evangelical churches and are seen as a bulwark against dropping attendance.

Rodriguez put the number of Hispanics in the United States who are either “born-again” or evangelical Christians at between 10 million and 16 million, and growing fast.

While numbers are hard to come by, “there are lots of indirect pieces of evidence” that point to the growth of Latino evangelicals, said Victoria DeFrancesco Soto, who studies Hispanic politics.

Six percent of evangelicals were Latinos in 2007, according to a Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life poll. Eight percent of evangelical or “born-again” voters in a Reuters/Ipsos exit poll at last November’s election said they were Hispanic.

Worshipping together with newly arrived Christians—as well as the new emphasis on Biblical teachings on immigration—is melting conservatives’ doubts about illegal immigrants, said Danny Carroll, an Old Testament professor at an evangelical seminary in Colorado.

He is part of a congregation at a church in Aurora that is attended mostly by white Americans on Sunday mornings. In the afternoons, the church then hosts separate services with their own pastors for Hispanic, Korean, Filipino and Russian immigrant groups

“Once a quarter, all these congregations get together for a worship service so all of a sudden you are sitting next to someone with a different face, different color, different language. Once you put a human face on it, the whole conversation changes,” he said.

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