

Fast-Growing Hispanic Evangelical Population Steps Up Support for Israel

Against the backdrop of growing threats facing Israel at home and abroad, one of the fastest-growing ethnoreligious segments in the U.S. is stepping up its support for the Jewish state.

At the forefront of the interests of America's Hispanic Evangelical Christian population is the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference (NHCLC)/Conela. Claiming to represent more than 100 million Hispanic evangelicals in the U.S., NHCLC/Conela is now beginning to wield its considerable influence for the purpose of standing up for Israel.

NHCLC—which earlier merged with Conela, a Latin American organization that serves more than 500,000 Latin churches across the world—states that its vision is to “exercise prophetic leadership by reconciling the vertical and horizontal planes of the Christian message, sanctification with service, conviction with compassion, the image of God with the habits of Christ, holiness and humility, John 3:16 and Matthew 25, and the prophetic with the practical.”

The organization adds that it is looking to “enrich the narrative of American Evangelicalism by replacing the media-exacerbated image of angry white evangelicals who oppose everything to a convicted yet compassionate multi-ethnic kingdom-culture community committed to sharing truth with love.”

“We seek to combine the message of Rev. Bill Graham of salvation with that of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s march of prophetic activism,” Rev. Dr. Samuel Rodriguez, president of NHCLC/Conela, told .

“That being said, our commitment to the Jewish people and Israel is also without compromise.” he said.

According to a recent Pew Research Center survey, Hispanics are one of the fastest-growing segments of the Evangelical Christian population, with 16 percent of American Hispanics identifying as evangelical in 2013, up from 12 percent in 2010. Similar trends have developed in Latin America, where Protestants now make up 19 percent of the population, with 69 percent of them belonging to evangelical churches.

These “evangélicos” have an above-average enthusiasm for their faith. They display this fervor by attending church services, praying more and strongly adhering to moral teachings, according to Pew. This Hispanic evangelical surge has come at the expense of Roman Catholicism, which traditionally has been the faith of the vast majority of Hispanics and has historically shaped their outlook.

As the leader of one of the largest Hispanic organizations in the U.S., Rev. Rodriguez has spoken at the White House and frequently consults with federal legislators from both parties on such issues such as social justice, the Latino community and values.

Support for Israel has become a key aspect of the mission of many evangelical Christian organizations, as is the case for the evangelical movement as a whole. While Rodriguez said that most Hispanic evangelicals are “absolutely committed to Israel,” he is concerned about the surge in anti-Semitism in the Latino world, especially among the younger generation.

While Latin America is home to many large and prosperous Jewish communities, most anti-Semitism in the region comes from the traditional sources based on prejudices inherited from Europe, especially from the Spanish Inquisition, as well as modern anti-Semitic and anti-Zionist rhetoric promoted by far-left elements like former Venezuelan president Hugo

Chavez.

Rodriguez said the mainstream media's portrayal of Israel is one of the main culprits behind opposition to Israel among the younger demographic, especially in light of the recent summer war in Gaza—which sparked upsurge in anti-Israel and anti-Semitic attacks around the world, including in Latin America.

“Many Latinos have in essence absorbed the mainstream media message that Israel is an aggressive, antagonistic force in the Middle East, where Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank are suffering at the hands of Israel,” said Rodriguez.

“Most Hispanics want to do justice and they want to align themselves with those who are marginalized and suffering. So they see the Palestinian community as suffering at the hands of the Israeli government,” he said.

In order to combat this, Rodriguez has formulated a two-pronged approach.

“My job is to convince young Latino people that supporting Israel actually works for the good of all in the Middle East,” he said. “First by affirming the nearly 150 million Latino evangelicals across the world in their commitment to Israel, then by elevating what we currently have in our community to teach about Israel to the wider Latino community.”

In order to spread this message, Rodriguez said it is important to “speak the truth about Israel” in order to counter the lies being spread about the Jewish state in the mainstream media.

“Israel is the sole democracy in that part of the world and a safeguard for religious pluralism. ... When I go to Israel I meet with Christian, Muslim and Jewish leaders. Israel is not persecuting Christians and Muslims. Israel is providing a space under democracy for religious pluralism to serve as an antidote against secular or even religious totalitarianism.

Israel is not the problem, Israel is the solution,” he said.

NHCLC/Conela recently formed a partnership with the International Christian Embassy Jerusalem (ICEJ), one of the largest Christian Zionist organizations in the world. Since 1980, ICEJ has hosted the annual Feast of Tabernacles celebration in Jerusalem to coincide with the Jewish holiday of Sukkot. This year, the event drew more than 5,000 Christians from 80 countries.

Rodriguez sees the partnership with ICEJ and the Feast of Tabernacles as a rallying point for Hispanic evangelicals to come to Israel every year and experience the country.

“The evangelical movement has experienced tremendous growth in the Latino world over recent decades and it is exciting to see their support and enthusiasm for Israel,” ICEJ Executive Director Dr. Juergen Buehler told .

“It is an indigenous expression of solidarity based on solid, biblical grounds, and we are thrilled that our annual Feast of Tabernacles will be a channel for these Hispanic Christians to convey their love and concern directly to the Israeli people,” added Buehler.

In light of the recent surge of Palestinian terrorism and rioting in Jerusalem and across Israel, Rodriguez said that Israel and Jews can count on the support of Hispanic Evangelicals.

“My message to Israel and the Jewish people is that there is a Hispanic Christian community emerging that will not abandon Israel or the Jewish people,” he said. “We will build a firewall against anti-Semitism, and we will do that with integrity and compassion.”

For the original article, visit .