

# Obama's Immigration Plans Pitting Christians Against Each Other

In announcing his decision to protect nearly 5 million undocumented immigrants from deportation, President Obama turned to Scripture, calling on Americans to protect the strangers in their land.

Yet the president's decision to bypass Congress and act on his own threatens to fracture a broad and rare coalition of religious groups, mostly Christian, including moderate and conservative evangelicals and Catholics, that had come together to push for a solution to improving the nation's immigration system.

Russell Moore, president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, said the president's move could tear apart that coalition and halt the momentum it established for passing a plan through Congress.

Moore said it's been a difficult road to get so many groups on the same page. Can they stay together after the president's action?

"It certainly didn't help," Moore said. "What we have united around is the idea of fixing a broken system with an earned path toward legal status or citizenship, not a blanket amnesty of any kind. This situation doesn't fix that problem."

For the past couple of years, legislators and immigration advocacy groups have tried to bring together a broad cross-section of interest groups to support a sweeping rewrite to the nation's immigration laws. High-tech business leaders worked with farmers and ranchers. Sheriffs and police chiefs talked with minority groups. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce

negotiated with top labor unions. And moderate and conservative religious groups spoke with one voice.

"Immigration reform created an incredible, unified coalition of people that don't normally work together," said the Rev. Tony Suarez, a Norfolk, Virginia, pastor and vice president of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference.

That coalition helped win enough conservative support to pass a broad immigration bill through the Senate last year, when 14 Republicans joined Democrats in a rare moment of bipartisanship. That momentum seemed to carry over into the House of Representatives, where Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio, had some members gauge his caucus' support for passing their own version of an immigration bill. Though the Senate bill died in the House, some advocates hoped the new Republican Congress would look to move legislation before the 2016 elections.

Rep. Mario Diaz-Balart, R-Florida, who worked for years on an immigration bill and tried to muster enough support among his colleagues, said the president's decision could blow up the tenuous religious coalition that will be critical to any progress in Congress.

"In an area where we started seeing some more unity, in an area that I think had the potential to bring together the American people, the president now, I think, has really driven a very, very large wedge into it," Diaz-Balart said.

Some Christian leaders are disappointed to see how quickly others are running away from immigration in the wake of Obama's decision.

"It is troubling," Miami Archbishop Thomas Wenski said. "The neo-nativists, or the anti-immigrant faction of the Republican Party, has allowed for this to happen. But it's not the majority of the party. All these people upset with Obama making this decision just have to take a deep breath."

Many in the Christian community, Wenski included, see reason for hope.

The Rev. Gabriel Salguero, president of the National Latino Evangelical Coalition, flew with Obama aboard Air Force One last week when the president traveled to Las Vegas to start selling his immigration plan.

Salguero told Obama his group supported the president's decision and assured him that the broader religious coalition would stick together to push Congress to pass a long-term solution to the immigration issue. Because, as Salguero put it, religious leaders are unlike politicians and D.C. insiders in one key way.

"Sometimes people are so caught up in the partisanship of the Beltway that they think the evangelical community reflects that tenor of conversation," Salguero said. "We don't. We're different. We talk the language we have in common, which is the gospel. So we can have disagreements, but our relationship is strong."

Suarez said religious leaders spoke often in the days before the president's announcement and knew they would each respond in very different ways. He said none of those conversations indicated a complete breakup of the coalition, and he remains confident it will be back come January, pressing the new Congress for an immigration bill.

"Anytime you're going to build a coalition, you have to know when to walk together and when to walk separate," he said. "You have to know when to give people the opportunity to express themselves and then come back together for the reason that brought us all together."