

Prominent Hispanic Christian Leader Calls Immigration Reform 'a Spiritual Issue'

Last Thursday, the Supreme Court handed President Obama a defeat with his immigration policy. But what does that mean? Immigration has become a huge issue in America. I was glad to receive a visit Monday by Rev. Tony Suarez, executive vice president of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Council.

I have the privilege of serving on the board of that great organization, led by my long-time friend Sam Rodriguez. I wanted to understand the issues. As a 10th-generation American, it's hard for me to identify with new immigrants. I believe the influx of Hispanics into this country has brought many wonderful changes. Many are Pentecostals and most are favorable toward traditional family values when they seem to be eroding in the culture at large.

At the same time, I publish books in Spanish and about 1 in 4 of my staff are Hispanic (all of them legal, I might add). So, it's important to me to really understand these issues and to know how the church should respond.

Like his mentor Sam Rodriguez, Tony is very articulate and I took him into the podcast studio to interview him. I asked him to help me understand exactly what it was that the Supreme Court turned down.

According to Tony, President Obama expanded a program called DACA he implemented through executive order a few years ago that didn't grant amnesty, but "deferred" deporting illegals. The Supreme Court basically said he had overstepped his authority and that Congress should set these policies.

Tony says that when Congress did not pass Immigration Reform in 2013 (after they promised that they would do it), they could not come to an agreement by executive action.

“President Obama expanded DACA to include more children and then he also had what’s called DAPA, which is the Deferred Action for Parents,” he said. “That, more than the children, is what became very controversial. It would not have helped all 11 to 14 million undocumented immigrants, but what he did would have helped about 5 to 6 million people.

“The key word in all of this though that I think is forgotten is that it was deferred. It was a band aid—it was a temporary solution—but it was never the end-all solution. So personally, when I hear people refer to it as amnesty, I’ve never taken it that way. We have to have a legislative solution to the problem and I still say, respectfully, that the President’s action was caused by Congress’ inaction.”

Had Congress taken care of this with a legislative solution, Tony believes President Obama would never have felt forced to issue any kind of executive action when it comes to immigration.

“It was never an amnesty. Personally, I have a problem with the word amnesty,” Tony told me. “To me, amnesty means something for nothing, and what Obama did was never an amnesty—it was a deferment. This is one of the reasons why Hispanics or anyone that qualified for the program always was cautious because what it essentially meant was, ‘I won’t deport you today—I’ll just defer it to another day.’”

Rev. Suarez made sure I understood that he doesn’t condone illegal methods of crossing the border. His father came from Colombia and he immigrated legally after marrying Rev. Suarez’s mother, a missionary of Irish descent from Chicago.

But today, Rev. Suarez pastors a Hispanic church in Virginia Beach, Virginia, where 67 percent of immigrants are

undocumented.

“It wasn’t by our choice, that’s not what we were targeting, that’s who God brought to us,” Suarez said. “In fact, to be honest with you, I was frustrated. I didn’t know how to build a church. (With) 67 percent undocumented immigrants, the median income was \$9 per hour. How do you build a church? I felt like the Lord spoke to my heart and He said, ‘I am the Lord of the harvest.’ He said, ‘I gave you this field to work with and cultivate,’ and so we worked amongst these people.”

Since I know that the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference has been a real leader in immigration reform, I asked Rev. Suarez how the church can help solve this very serious problem in our society.

He said polls show that over 60 percent of all evangelicals believe there needs to be immigration reform.

“What I would ask believers to do is not believe all the rhetoric,” he said. “One of the biggest issues we have today is rhetoric. You can’t believe all of the rhetoric. We’re not advocating amnesty. We’re talking about securing the borders, bringing people out of the shadows so that they pass a background check, that they pay a fine or that they begin to pay taxes. Imagine what that would do to our economy. Imagine what it would mean if hundreds of thousands of people all of a sudden start paying taxes. It would be a boost for our economy.”

Rev. Suarez closed by making these points:

- “I would ask believers to remember the side of humanity that’s here. Put a human face to it and realize that you probably know someone and more than likely you worship with someone who’s undocumented. You just don’t know it. It’s not just a Latino problem. There’s over 10,000 Irish immigrants along the east coast that are fighting for immigration reform. Remember that it’s for our Asian

community, our Hispanic brethren and our African immigrant brethren that are here, and so put a human face to it.

- “If one of these fanatical approaches were to take place and you deported 14 million people, you would virtually close every Hispanic church in the United States.
- “I personally think that immigration reform is a spiritual issue. I think the enemy knows the revival in this country; it’s a multi-cultural revival. It’s coming through the immigrant community. It’s spiritual. We sowed seeds. We sowed a seed of revival around the world. We sent missionaries to Asia, to Africa, to South America and we saw great revival. But as I understand the law of sowing and reaping, where you sow that seed, you’re also going to reap a harvest. Look at how God has confirmed that word because we’re having a multi-cultural revival here in the United States.
- “The enemy is aware of where the revival is coming from and he’s doing everything he can to squash it, to stop it. I do believe the enemy is behind any plan to deport 11 to 14 million people. He would close immigrant churches throughout the country. He would love it! He would love to squash the revival. So I think it’s a spiritual issue, but I believe God’s going to help us but at the end of the day, Congress has to act. Not the White House and not the Supreme Court. We need Congress to act and represent the people.” {eoa}