

Evangelicals and Obama, A Holy Alliance?

By: Rev. Samuel Rodriguez – July 6, 2010

The much anticipated speech on Immigration by the President of the United States began with a much unexpected introduction. Bill Hybels, Senior Pastor of Willow Creek Church in the suburbs of Chicago introduced our Commander In Chief. Hybels, an evangelical Pastor of one of the nation's largest congregations also oversees what may arguably stand as the preeminent non denominational evangelical network, the Willow Creek Association. The question arises, why would a conservative Evangelical pastor introduce the President of the United States when evangelicals and the President disagree on so many issues? The answer lies embedded in the underlying threads that surround the immigration reform debate.

While the immigration reform continues to polarize communities and divide our country, ironically, it also facilitates an opportunity for a conversation and relationship that otherwise would not exist; a relationship between conservative evangelicals and President Barack Obama. In addition to Hybel's introduction, evangelical leaders provided defacto covering sitting front and center for the President as he addressed the nation from the podium at American University. Richard Land, Leith Anderson and yours truly sat awaiting the President's presentation on an issue that transcends political ideology.

Evangelicals in today's immigration debate stand as the leading constituency in favor of a comprehensive solution. In 2006, business and immigrant advocacy groups led the charge. Today, the faith community, particularly the evangelical community stands front and center just as mainline denominations led the charge for Civil Rights in the 1950's and 60's. Correspondingly, Evangelicals, widely recognized as social conservatives and the constituency that reinvigorated the Republican Party in 1980's support immigration reform for three primary reasons.

First, the growth of Evangelical communities in the majority of denominations stems from their ethnic and immigrant constituency. In other words, support for immigration is a matter of both short term and long term viability and sustainability. Second, Evangelicals refuse to meet the mistakes of the past. In the 1960's as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. marched on Washington, evangelicals, with a few exceptions, stood in the pews, in the worst case hostile to the movement, in the best case scenario, apathetic. Consequently, the lack of support for Civil Rights resulted in the building of a wall between the African American Church and the Evangelical community. A wall that today is beginning to show some cracks. They do not want to repeat history with the 50 million strong Hispanic community.

Finally, Evangelicals support immigration reform as a result of a biblical imperative. From Leviticus 19 to the Good Samaritan Parable, Evangelical Pastors understand the bible supports the reconciliation of the rule of law (Romans 13) with compassion for the stranger (Leviticus 19). President Obama recognizes the influence the faith and family voters have with the Republican Party. Possibly, the only hope for successful passage of immigration reform legislation lies in the prophetic witness of the vociferous community.

As the President framed the argument for reform, he spoke about the moral imperative. Evangelicals stand poised to provide the President cover as he continues to push for a Just integration strategy. For at the end of the day this unique partnership between the President and Evangelicals may very serve as the tipping point that awakens the conscience of a nation to push back on extremism and reconcile before the altar of compassion and grace. A partnership that can also serve our nation as we confront other challenges in the future. It was once asked; Does anything good come out of Nazareth? Well, can anything good come out of immigration reform? Something already has.