

The Undocumented Church

Any given Sunday in the pews of America's Hispanic Churches sits two types of worshippers. The difference is not black or white, rich or poor, catholic or evangelical, Republican or Democrat, nor is it G12 or seeker. The difference between these two types of Hispanic believers not only affects the dynamics of ministry but it catapults the church into the political battleground of the moment, immigration. Any given Sunday, lifting hands and offering sacrifice of Praise, are Born Again Latinos that are in this country legally and those that are not. *Without a viable solution to the crisis, the implication for ministry and the subsequent trends in deliberate Latino outreach underline the necessity to address the issue.*

For example, like never before, churches are reaching out to the fastest growing demographic of the American populous, Hispanics. From community outreach to deliberately planting Hispanic Churches to adding a Spanish speaking service to the weekly program, churches throughout the 50 states are growing as a result of new Hispanic converts. Consequently, three possible trends may emerge. First, if legislation passes that require all corporations including not for profit organizations that come in contact with undocumented individuals to be reported to authorities, then Churches may diminish or halt outreach to this targeted group in order to avoid the possible legal ramifications. Second, Latino immigrants may begin to avoid attending or connecting to churches, particularly those lead by non-Hispanics. Thirdly, major denominations, such as The Assemblies of God, who in the past few years has experienced unprecedented growth via its Hispanic congregations, may loose a significant portion of their fellowship. "We could easily loose from 30 to 40 % of our church members," stated Rev. Felix Posos, Assemblies of God Northern Pacific Latin American District Superintendent overseeing close to 200 churches in California, Washington, Oregon, and Nevada. Almost every major evangelical denomination, fellowship, or network has vested interest in the Hispanic Community. How pastors and leaders respond in this hour may determine whether or not Hispanics continue to forge strategic relationships with the non Hispanic church or isolate itself even more adding to the old paradigm of Sunday being the most segregated day in America. Yet, this time, it will not be Black or White, but Black, white and Hispanic.

Immigration is the political hot button issue of the moment. According to many political insiders, the stance major politicians take on this issue will determine their political viability for the upcoming mid term and 2008 elections. Without question, 9/11 transformed the attitude of many Americans towards immigrants. Cable pundits and the Minute Man project, a militia type organization on the

Arizona/Mexico Border, exasperate the call for border security and immigration reform. Although we would all agree that America needs to protect our borders from the entry of individuals that want to do us harm, the question we must confront as Pastors and Church Leaders is what do we do with the undocumented or illegal immigrants currently here? It is, after all, the moral, political, and legal juxtaposition of the moment for the Evangelical Church.

Up to now, the Evangelical church in America has stood primarily silent on this issue. Why you may ask? The answer stems from the fact that we as Evangelicals have historically resonated with the conservative driving tenants of law and order within our society. **The issue of immigration demands that the church reconciles a society founded on the Judeo Christian value System, with the pillars of law and order and the promise of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Only the Church can bring these three elements together. Pastors and leaders must take the lead. Here's how:**

First address implications to ministry. The legislation recently passed in the House of Representatives, known as the Sensenbrenner Bill or HR 4437 would in essence deport the 10 to 13 Million undocumented or illegal immigrants currently in America. In effect, the children born here can stay and the parents who are undocumented must be deported to their country of origin. This would devastate and disenfranchise over 10 million families. The psychological, economic, spiritual, and social effects of such action would be destructive and insurmountable. In addition, the 20 million strong Hispanic Evangelical church would be devastated. Rev. Gilbert Velez, Policy Director for The National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference and Senior Pastor of Mercy Church in Laredo, Texas shares an additional concern. "The fastest growing segment of Born Again Believers in America today is of Hispanic descent. This legislation and others like it would not only change our nation, it will change the very make up of the Church," stated Velez. Moreover, many Hispanic Pastors fear that the federal government could even require Pastors or Faith Based Supervisors to report undocumented workers or loose their not for profit status.

Secondly, we must present a comprehensive solution based on biblical principles. Does the bible provide any guidance in respect to immigration? Leviticus 19:33-34 teaches us, "When an alien lives with you in your land, do not mistreat him. The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the Lord your God." God requires that we demonstrate compassion to the immigrant. In Deuteronomy 10:18-19, the bible teaches us that "God defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food, and clothing. And you are to love those who are aliens,"

As Evangelical Pastors and leaders we appreciate the need to secure our nation and apply the rule of law. It's time to stop illegal immigration and incorporate a Pro Legal Immigration policy based on Biblical values. There is a way we continue to reach out to Hispanics and other immigrants while addressing the issues of border security. *The church must demand the implementation of current immigration laws, and present a viable solution to the undocumented immigrants currently in our nation within the framework of Biblical mandates and our Judeo/Christian Value System. A viable and sustainable comprehensive package would be the following:*

1. Border enforcement and protection initiatives that include the application and enhancement of technological, military and law enforcement capabilities that will protect our borders while enabling and facilitating the implementation of our nation's immigration policy.
2. Temporary designation for immigrant workers and their families who upon satisfaction of criteria and due process, begin the path towards permanent residency and citizenship
3. Overhaul of immigration quotas and current tenants in the family reunification process with the purpose of drastically reducing the waiting times for separated families while increasing the number of visas granted to individuals that will contribute intellectual, spiritual, and economic capital to the American Experience.
4. A viable guest worker program that will strengthen the economic vitality of both employer and employee.
5. The creation of safeguards against any policy that creates precocious transitions in status thus jeopardizing the stability and well being of immigrant families.

Thirdly, we must speak up as the future of our nation is at stake. There is a cultural war in America. The war is between the secularists and the believers, those that believe in biblical truth and those that adhere to moral relativism. More than ever the war is fought in the ballot box, mass media, school boards, and court rooms. The church needs the Hispanic Christian to arise. The political irony in all of this is that political parties that usually count with the Evangelical vote particularly on social issues may alienate the core constituency that will determine the outcome of national elections for the next generation. Hispanic Evangelicals could easily be the constituency that will transform the political spectrum in our nation. *Today talk show hosts and fringe groups have hijacked this issue for political gain. Pastors and leaders must step up and take the lead role in presenting a biblical and humane alternative.*

Any given Sunday throughout the Hispanic Churches across America sit people that embody the driving principles of our founding fathers. If Washington, Jefferson, Adams, or Madison would look at America today and

discover that there are people coming to America who love God, family and hard work, who share a dream, based on the Judeo Christian ethos, to enrich their families and country, how would they react? *How should Pastors and church leaders react? I wholeheartedly believe the founding fathers would be pleased. I also pray that America's pastors and leaders be encouraged to protect our country and protect our fellow believers.*

Rev. Sam Rodriguez is the President of The National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference which is the National Hispanic Association of Evangelicals striving to serve approximately 20 Million Hispanic Believers in issues of leadership, fellowship, networking, partnerships, and public policy.