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The 'Illegal' Church

By Sammy Rodríguez

How will the American church respond to public policy that affects its fastest-growing demographic?



Any given Sunday, in the pews of America's Hispanic churches sit two types of worshipers—those who are in this country legally and those who are not. The issues surrounding immigration not only affect the dynamics of ministry but catapult the church into the political battleground of the moment. Consequently, three possible outcomes emerge as we respond to this unavoidable trend:

First, if legislation passes that would require all corporations that come in contact with undocumented individuals—including nonprofit organizations—to be reported to authorities, 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 with churches—particularly those led by non-Hispanics. Third, major denominations, such as the Assemblies of God (who in the last few years has experienced unprecedented growth via its Hispanic congregations) may lose a significant portion of their fellowship.

Almost every major evangelical denomination, fellowship or network has a 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 themselves even more—confirming the old paradigm of Sunday being the most segregated day in America.

Although we would all agree that America needs to protect its borders from the entry of individuals who 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? Up until now, the evangelical church in America has stood primarily silent on this issue. Why? We evangelicals

have historically resonated with the conservative driving tenets of law and order within our society.

However, the issue of immigration demands the church reconcile 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. I believe that only the church can bring these three elements together—and pastors and leaders must take the lead.

First, we must address implications for ministry. Legislation recently passed in the House of Representatives, known as the Sensenbrenner Bill (or HR 4437), that would in essence deport the 10 to 13 million undocumented or illegal immigrants currently in America. In effect, the children born here can stay, but parents who are undocumented must be deported to their countries of origin.

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. The Rev. Gilbert Velez, policy director for the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference and senior pastor of Mercy Christian Church in Laredo, Texas, shares an additional concern.

"The fastest-growing segment of born-again believers in America today is of Hispanic descent," Velez states. "This legislation and others like it would not only change our nation, it (would) change the very makeup of the church."

Many fear the government could require pastors or faith-based supervisors to report undocumented workers or lose their nonprofit status.

Second, 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"" (NIV).

There is a way we can continue to reach out to Hispanics and other immigrants while addressing the issues of border security. The church must call for the implementation of current immigration laws and present a viable solution to the undocumented immigrants currently in our nation.

Third, we must speak up as the future of our nation is at stake. There is a cultural war in America, and more than ever, this war is fought in the ballot box, mass media, school boards and the courtrooms. The church needs Hispanic Christians to arise and partner in this battle.

The irony in all of this is political parties that usually earn the evangelical vote (particularly on social issues) may alienate the core constituency that will determine the outcome of national elections for the next generation, as Hispanic evangelicals transform the political spectrum in our nation. Pastors and leaders must step up, and make a case for a biblical and humane alternative.

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