

Immigration issues touch denominations; More people in the pews are jumping into the debate and looking for a balance between justice and compassion

USA TODAY

March 22, 2012 Thursday, FINAL EDITION

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Section: NEWS; Pg. 3A

Length: 805 words

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Body

The Bible tells its readers to obey the law, but it also tells them to welcome strangers and foreigners.

That has left some Christians divided over the issue of immigration reform.

Members of Clergy for Tolerance, based here, say new immigration laws have to mix justice with compassion.

But supporters of measures such as Alabama's say the Bible teaches that the government's job is to enforce the law, and those who break it should be punished. The American Center for Law and Justice, a Christian legal group, filed a brief in federal court supporting the Alabama law.

That measure, which the Obama administration is challenging, prohibits undocumented immigrants from entering into "business transactions" with the state, requires police to check immigration status during traffic stops and makes it a crime for U.S. citizens to knowingly assist undocumented immigrants.

"The whole heart of the Gospel is in Matthew 25, where Jesus said, 'I was a stranger and you welcomed me,'" said Randy Hoover-Dempsey, pastor of All Saints Episcopal Church in Smyrna, Tenn., whose congregation includes about 200 Burmese immigrants.

Welcoming strangers and immigrants is a good thing, said Gil McKee, pastor of First Baptist Church in Tuscaloosa, Ala.

But the Bible is no excuse for breaking the law, said McKee, whose congregation includes Alabama Gov. Robert Bentley, a Republican who pushed for a state law that cracks down on illegal immigration.

"We have an obligation under Romans 13 -- to obey the law," McKee said. "A lot of the folks who are here illegally know the law. It's their responsibility as a result to abide by the law." Romans 13 says in part, "Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God."

Most major denominations in the United States support changes in immigration law.

Last summer, the Southern Baptist Convention, the largest Protestant group in the USA, passed a resolution calling for the federal government to increase border security while at the same time providing "a just and compassionate path to legal status" for people in the U.S. illegally.

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Roman Catholic bishops and the National Association of Evangelicals have also supported comprehensive changes in immigration law.

Reaction among people in the pews has been mixed. A 2010 Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life survey showed that 39% of evangelicals and 45% of Catholics support reforms that include tighter borders as well as a path to citizenship.

Roy Beck, executive director of NumbersUSA, a group that wants to lessen immigration, said denominations that support more lenient immigration laws are well-meaning but wrong. "Illegal aliens to them are persons in need," he said. "They respond, as religious institutions should, with compassion. Where they get off track is thinking that this illegal alien in front of me doesn't have to obey the law."

Beck, a former associate editor of the United Methodist Reporter, said that the Bible doesn't offer answers.

He said he believes that churches want reform without enforcement. For Beck, that means deporting anyone in the U.S. illegally.

"Either people who break the law have to go back home or you don't have immigration law," he said.

Many immigrants in the country illegally want to become legal but have few options to do so, said Kayla Snow, an immigration counselor at Vineyard Columbus, a megachurch of about 8,500 in Westerville, Ohio, a suburb of Columbus.

The church runs a counseling service for immigrants two days a week. It got involved in immigration issues because the church has immigrant members, some of whom are in the country illegally.

"If we are going to care for our immigrant brothers and sisters in the U.S. -- something has to change in the law," she said. "It doesn't treat them fairly."

Heather Larson, director of compassion and justice ministry at Willow Creek Community Church in suburban Chicago, agrees. Willow Creek, which draws more than 24,000 people to its weekend services, is one of the most influential megachurches in the country.

"(Our) wake-up call to the need for reform came from hearing personal stories of people in our congregation and our community who are affected by this broken system," Larson wrote in an e-mail. "Current immigration laws can divide families and leave people feeling isolated and hopeless."

McKee said he feels sympathy for families that are broken up when parents or other family members are deported, but he said that people have to face the consequences of deciding to enter the country illegally. However, McKee is also pragmatic. He would like to see some reform that allows people who work hard and don't have a criminal record to become legal residents.

Smietana also reports for The Tennessean in Nashville

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: NEWSPAPER

Subject: IMMIGRATION (96%); RELIGION (95%); CHRISTIANS & CHRISTIANITY (94%); IMMIGRATION LAW (91%); ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS (90%); IMMIGRATION REGULATION & POLICY (90%); BIBLE & CHRISTIAN TEXTS (90%); CLERGY & RELIGIOUS VOCATIONS (90%); CATHOLICS & CATHOLICISM (89%);

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PROTESTANTS & PROTESTANTISM (89%); CITIZENSHIP (78%); TERRITORIAL & NATIONAL BORDERS (78%); LAW ENFORCEMENT (78%); CITIZENSHIP LAW (78%); US FEDERAL GOVERNMENT (77%); TALKS & MEETINGS (77%); MIGRATION ISSUES (77%); US STATE GOVERNMENT (77%); US REPUBLICAN PARTY (76%); SUITS & CLAIMS (76%); BORDER CONTROL (75%); LAW COURTS & TRIBUNALS (72%); ASSOCIATIONS & ORGANIZATIONS (72%); NATIONAL SECURITY (60%); POLLS & SURVEYS (50%)

Company: AMERICAN CENTER FOR LAW & JUSTICE (71%)

Organization: AMERICAN CENTER FOR LAW & JUSTICE (57%)

Person: BARACK OBAMA (78%); ROBERT BENTLEY (56%)

Geographic: TUSCALOOSA, AL, USA (77%); ALABAMA, USA (94%); TENNESSEE, USA (79%); UNITED STATES (94%)

Load-Date: March 22, 2012