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Evangelical Perspectives on Latino Immigration

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Abstract

Since 2006, a number of evangelical Christian leaders and organizations have become allies to the movement for comprehensive immigration reform in the United States. Starting with the historical context of the Civil Rights movement, this study will examine points of contact and divergence among the positions and practices of white, black and Latino evangelicals regarding the issue of Latino immigration. Notable nuances within and among the groups exist due to theological traditions, lived experience, socio-economic considerations and demographics. In order to become more effective allies in the comprehensive immigration reform movement, evangelical Christians need to address a number of challenges as individuals, churches, and denominations.

KEY WORDS: African-American, civil rights, evangelical, immigration reform, Latino

Introduction

On July 1, 2010, four top evangelical Christian leaders were invited to the White House to hear a speech by President Barack Obama calling for immigration reform. Those leaders included Rev. Leith Anderson, president of the National Association of Evangelicals; Dr. Richard Land, president of the Southern Baptist Convention Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission; Rev. Samuel Rodriguez, president of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference; and Pastor Bill Hybels of the 12,000 member Willow Creek Community Church of suburban Chicago (Gilgoff, 2010). According to CNN editor Dan Gilgoff, that event was

a testament both to the importance the issue has come to assume in the evangelical world—including among leaders who have battled Democrats on social issues like abortion and gay marriage—and to the White House’s eagerness to enlist evangelicals to help to counter conservative opposition to the idea of a path to citizenship for illegal immigrations [sic] already in the U.S. (2010)

Since 2006, a number of evangelical Christian leaders and organizations have become outspoken allies for the comprehensive immigration reform movement in this country. In contrast to conservative Christian media spokespersons who present themselves as strident and inflexible combatants on a limited number of family issues (primarily the “Pro-Life” and “Sanctity of Marriage” movements), the broader reality is that many evangelical Christians, especially those of the younger generation, have become involved in and advocates for a wide range of social issues, both domestic and international (Ryden, 2011). Under the umbrella of the more than forty evangelical denominations in the U.S., there are sub-sets of believers who represent a continuum of views on immigration policy that can be categorized as relatively liberal, moderate, or conservative (G. Smith, 2006). In addition, the views of evangelicals on

immigration vary along and within ethnic groups: African American, non-Hispanic white, and Latino evangelicals also represent a range of perspectives on the issue.¹

This study will present an overview of recent Christian evangelical involvement in the immigration debate, starting with the historical context of the Civil Rights movement in the United States, and examining points of contact and divergence among the positions and practices of white, black and Latino evangelicals regarding the issue of Latino immigration. Although this study will focus only on evangelical Christian views, it will be shown that rather than one monolithic belief regarding this issue, notable nuances exist among the various sub-groups of evangelical Christians, and among each of the ethnic groups presented. Reasons for those nuances include theological and historical traditions, demographics, socio-economic considerations and lived experience. The conclusion will present some of the challenges evangelical Christians need to address in order to become more effective allies in the comprehensive immigration reform movement.

The Origins of the Evangelical Christian Denomination in the United States

As is commonly known, the presence of Protestantism in the United States can be traced back to the first Europeans who settled in New England in the 1600s (Wald & Calhoun-Brown, 2011). The segment of the Protestant religion known as evangelicals, however, did not emerge until much later, in the 1920s and 1930s, when a significant shift in Protestant theology occurred known then as “modernism” or the view that the Bible was a humanly-created rather than divinely inspired text (Roebuck, 2006). The result was a split between what are now known as “mainline” Protestant denominations and “evangelical” Protestant denominations, the latter group holding fast to the belief that the Bible is the authoritative Word of God (2006). While some Protestants, known as fundamentalists, focused so completely on spiritual matters such as

conversion of lost souls that they for the most part withdrew from having any reforming influence on society, others tried to build a consensus among various denominations and present a more positive image to secular society (2006). For example, the National Association of Evangelicals was founded in 1941 under the banner of “cooperation without compromise” (2006, p. 94).

Identifying one all-encompassing definition of “evangelical” presents a challenge because the identifying criteria can be extremely broad or narrow, depending on the group doing the defining. Essentially, evangelical Christians are those who believe the Bible is the divinely inspired and inerrant Word of God, that personal faith in Jesus Christ is necessary for salvation, and that believers have a personal obligation to share their faith with others through evangelism (Ryden, 2011). According to the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, adult evangelicals today make up 26.3% of the U.S. population, or around 80 million people (Affiliations, 2007). They comprise the largest religious group in the U.S., surpassing Roman Catholics at 23.9 %, mainline Protestants at 18.1% and historically black churches at 6.9% (2007).² Most fundamentalists as well as most members of the Southern Baptist Convention would see themselves as distinct from evangelicals for their own particular reasons, reasons that have more to do with affiliations rather than theology.³ But for the purposes of this paper, both groups will be included as evangelical (not mainline Protestant) denominations, especially since they are key participants in the issue of Latino immigration.

One other salient characteristic of U.S. evangelical denominations that cannot be ignored is the continued ethnic-racial segregation that, except for the recent growth of multi-ethnic churches, still manifests itself in separate black, white and Latino congregations. In the book *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*, authors Emerson

and Smith (2000) trace the origins of the evangelicalism in America and the evolution of segregated churches. Before the War for Independence, blacks and whites attended church together, the case generally being that African American slaves accompanied their slave owners to church services (2000). But then with the end of the American Revolution, a number of northern evangelicals were concerned by the inconsistency of gaining their own freedom but denying it to slaves, although at the same time they were reticent to make slavery an issue that might overshadow their primary focus on evangelism (2000). Eventually, several denominations split along north and south lines over the issue of slavery, with southern clergy and parishioners insisting on the legal and biblical basis for slavery (2000). After the Civil War, however, there was a mass exodus by African Americans from white churches because they were generally barred from equal participation in those churches. Authors Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) note that “the move toward racially separate churches was not a matter of doctrinal disagreement, but a protest against unequal and restrictive treatment” (as cited in Emerson & Smith, 2000). In the book *Religion in America Since 1945*, Allitt states that “[r]eligion was one aspect of Southern life in which blacks rather than whites pioneered segregation” in order to create a space that offered fellowship and encouragement in contrast to “a hostile white world” (2003, p. 44).

Before the twentieth century, both the existence of Latino churches (either Catholic or Protestant) and participation by Latinos in churches in the United States were negligible due to anti-Catholic and anti-Mexican prejudices (Lint Sagarena, 2006). For many individuals, the only option was “domestic piety in the form of home altars and prayer groups [which] maintained connections to the Catholic faith” (2006, p.133). In addition, outreach efforts to Latinos (primarily Mexicans and Mexican Americans) by Catholic and Protestant churches during the nineteenth century were hampered by lack of resources and personnel and the great distances

between the small communities in the Southwest where most Latinos lived (Meier, 2000). Even in the early decades of the twentieth century, those few Catholic and Protestant clergy who attempted to minister to Latinos and address the issues of worker exploitation and discrimination against them were met with apathy and even “downright hostility” on the part of the older, higher echelon officials of their respective denominations (2000, p. 48). Some local Catholic and mainline Protestant clergymen, in spite of the lack of compassion expressed by their leaders, continued to reach out to Latinos in their communities and began to incorporate Mexican cultural aspects into their worship (2000). Fundamentalist preachers were also successful in attracting Latino converts because of the style of worship they offered, often conducting services in Spanish, but their congregations were usually small, often operating out of storefronts (2000).

Evangelical Churches and the Civil Rights Movement

During the period of the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, history shows that the white evangelical church was noticeably silent (Ryden, 2011). Most evangelicals up to and during that time embraced a view similar to the fundamentalists, choosing the privatization of religious faith rather than getting involved in political issues, especially in order to distinguish themselves from the mainline denominations’ emphasis on the “social gospel” (Allitt, 2003). The Southern Baptists in particular were also silent because their very organization had been founded in 1845 when southern Baptists and northern Baptists split over the issue of slavery (Hankins, 2002).⁴ Those southern white clergymen who were sympathetic to the Civil Rights cause had to risk antagonizing their congregations if they were too outspoken on desegregation (Allitt, 2003).

In contrast, a key group of African American Christians was centrally involved in the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 60s. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference, under the direction of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., a Baptist minister with a message of non-

violent resistance, led the way, along with Ralph Abernathy, Andrew Young, and others (Allitt, 2003). Paradoxically, according to the volume *Faith in America*, also during the Civil Rights movement “[a] majority of the black church...embrace[d] a social posture with an emphasis on self-preservation, often through assimilation of what was deemed socially acceptable and normative (read: ‘white norms’)” (Finley & Alexander, 2006). Repeating the strategy of using legal and biblical arguments to justify slavery, and in a strong parallel to today’s legal and biblical arguments to support immigration enforcement, a number of Christian leaders at that time claimed both biblical principles and legal precedents (“separate but equal”) for upholding segregation (Allitt, 2003).

Historically, each Latino sub-group (Mexican, Cuban, Puerto Rican, etc.) has had a different experience in the U.S. For example, while Cubans generally enjoyed political refugee status from the 1960s to the 1990s, Mexicans and Mexican Americans were objects of discrimination, especially in the Southwest (Armbruster-Sandoval, 2008). Even though the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo had guaranteed equal rights for Mexican citizens who decided to stay in the newly claimed territory of the United States, their lived experience was that of second-class citizens at best (2008). It was not until after World War II that both Catholic and mainline Protestant denominations became more active in supporting civil rights for Latinos (Meier, 2000). The Civil Rights movement for Latinos was much smaller in comparison to the Civil Rights movement for African Americans, since in 1960 there were only about seven million Hispanics in the U.S., comprising only about four percent of the population (DiConti, 2000). But with the rise of the United Farm Workers Union and the coming of age of Mexican American leaders such as César Chávez, Dolores Huerta, and Reies López Tijerina in the 1960s,

younger Protestant and Catholic clergy in particular took up the cause of exploited agricultural workers and worked for social rights of U.S. Latinos (Meier, 2000).

The Rise of White Evangelical Social Engagement

The emergence of white evangelical Christians as a political influence in the U.S. in the 1970s and 1980s occurred in response to emerging social trends and specific political events. President Jimmy Carter, the Democratic candidate elected in 1976, openly identified himself as a “born-again” believer and promised to direct foreign policy decisions based on Christian principles and respect for human rights (Allitt, 2003). However, in spite of foreign policy achievements such as the Camp David peace accord between Israel and Egypt, Carter’s track record in domestic policies left many evangelicals disillusioned (2003). The New Christian Right, which included groups such as the Moral Majority, founded in 1979 by the Rev. Jerry Falwell and others, attempted to galvanize the faithful to counteract what they identified as the moral decline of America (Ingersoll, 2006). Most rallied around family issues such as school prayer, creationism, the traditional family structure and the rights of the unborn and the defenseless (Wald & Calhoun-Brown, 2011). Evangelical allegiances with the Republican Party, in particular with President Ronald Reagan, also came into focus during this period (Roebuck, 2006). Unfortunately, in many cases, evangelical participation in the political arena during this era was ineffective or even counter-productive, primarily because many self-appointed evangelical leaders lacked a meaningful comprehension of the intricacies of the political process and/or the ability to articulate their views in ways that would be acceptable to the greater public at large (Sider, 2008).

Current Evangelical Perspectives on Latino Immigration

On the issue of Latino immigration and illegal immigration, evangelicals appear to be split into two camps: one that endorses immigration enforcement primarily, and one that is more moderate, endorsing elements of both immigration enforcement and immigration reform. This division crosses racial and ethnic lines—in other words, adherents of each position can be found among white, black and Latino evangelicals.

As an example of a Christian organization that endorses immigration enforcement, the Family Research Council is a right-wing conservative Christian policy lobbying group located in Washington, D.C. Although the Family Research Council website does not show any kind of position statement on the issue of immigration or illegal immigration, its president, Tony Perkins, has been outspoken on the negative economic impact of illegal immigrants in the U.S. (Wallace, 2012). The Southern Poverty Law Center (which labels FRC a “hate group”) links Mr. Perkins with other conservative Christian leaders such as Gary Bauer of American Values and Phyllis Schlafly of Eagle Forum in articulating a nativist stance that wants to put an end to immigration in order to protect the American Way and American families (Zaitchik, 2006).

The Family Research Council and its adherents represent those conservative Christians whose views tend to mirror the views of the Republican Party and conservative media outlets such as Fox News. In an interview on the topic of immigration, former Bush policy advisor Michael Gerson observed that, “among conservative Christians in America, probably the single most important formative institution on their views is Fox News. And Fox News [has been] deeply anti-immigrant in its coverage” (Melkonian-Hoover, 2011). In addition, according to the Pew Research Center, “The Republican Party has gained ground among white evangelical Christians in recent years. Currently [in 2012], 49% of non-Hispanic white evangelicals say they

are Republicans, up from 43% in 2009” (“Partisan Polarization,” 2012, p.10). At the same time, the Republican Party itself has become more conservative, as disenchanted moderates and even some conservatives have left the party to become independents (2012).

However, in contrast to the more outspoken evangelical proponents of immigration enforcement, there have come forth a number of evangelical leaders and organizations that are calling for comprehensive immigration reform. At the forefront would be the Southern Baptist Convention, the Washington, D.C. policy institute Sojourners, Christians for Comprehensive Immigration Reform (CCIR), and the National Association of Evangelicals and its ministry arm World Vision. In 2006, under the leadership of Richard Land, the Southern Baptist Convention approved a resolution calling for both immigration enforcement and reform (“On the Crisis of Illegal,” 2006, n.p.). Invoking biblical principles, the resolution encouraged Southern Baptists to reach out and minister to immigrants’ spiritual and material needs, and to encourage undocumented immigrants to seek a path to legalization (2006). The resolution also criticized both Democratic and Republican administrations for the failure to enforce existing laws regarding immigration and employment and called for immediate action regarding the same (2006; Land & Duke, 2011). Unfortunately, since the SBC’s governance structure grants complete autonomy to individual churches and renders convention resolutions as non-binding, the leadership has no power to enforce compliance with any resolutions it sets forth (Queen, 1991).⁵

The Washington D.C. based inter-faith organization Sojourners, founded in the 1970s, has been outspoken on the immigration debate for a number of years. The CEO of Sojourners, Jim Wallis, is a nationally-recognized speaker on topics of social justice from a Christian perspective (“Jim Wallis,” n.d.). His organization publishes a variety of educational resources

on the topic of immigration targeted to pastors and congregations in an effort to counter what Wallis refers to as “the Gospel of Glen, Rush, Sean and Bill” with Scriptural principles (Melkonian-Hoover, 2011, p. 100). The CCIR, a coalition of mainline Protestant, non-evangelical, and evangelical organizations under the auspices of Sojourners, formed in 2007 in order to petition Congress for legislation that would push for border enforcement and also better guest worker programs as well as to educate church congregations in key states about issues related to immigration (Banerjee, 2007). In 2009 the National Association of Evangelicals issued a similar position statement on the issue of immigration, setting forth a biblical foundation for the compassionate and fair treatment of immigrants in the light of the “national realities” of a broken immigration system and economic exigencies affecting immigrants (“An Evangelical Call,” 2009). That document, “An Evangelical Call to Civic Responsibility” on the topic of immigration, included a charge to churches to treat immigrants with respect and mercy, as well as a call for the federal government to safeguard national borders while also devising a more functional immigration system for workers and their families, fair labor and civil laws, and an equitable process through which immigrants could obtain legal status and/or citizenship (Pally, 2011). In addition, in 2009, Matthew Soerens and Jenny Hwang, two representatives of the outreach ministry of the NAE, World Vision, published the book *Welcoming the Stranger: Justice, Compassion and Truth in the Immigration Debate*, which has had a great impact in educating evangelicals on the issue of immigration and advocating for comprehensive immigration reform (Melkonian-Hoover, 2011).

Most recently, the newly organized Evangelical Immigration Table, an unprecedented coalition of more than 150 evangelical leaders and organizations, joined together in June 2012 to call on Congress to press for reform and to launch a project of church mobilization, education

and advocacy (“Press Conference,” 2012). For the first time, some conservative Christian leaders such as pastor and author Max Lucado and organizations such Focus on the Family also lent their support to this coalition (Gryboski, 2012). In their inaugural press conference, Carlos Moran (member of the Board of Directors of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference) said the main obstacles to change were inactivity and passivity on the part of Christians and that they are committed to engaging the support of evangelical believers across the country, emphasizing in particular that current practices of immigration enforcement adversely affect immigrant families (“Press Conference,” 2012). Jim Wallis said they are working to get special interest groups in Washington who want to protect cheap labor to embrace a more moral and ethical approach to the employment of immigrant laborers (2012). Richard Land added that there is momentum for this kind of change because chambers of commerce across the country are concerned about the economic disruption that is occurring as a result of anti-immigration legislation at the state level (as cited in Miller, 2012). Having learned the lessons missed by the Moral Majority in the 1980s, the discourse presented by the Evangelical Immigration Table includes language that addresses both the economic concerns that would draw the attention of policy makers as well as the emphasis on the importance of family that evangelical church members would support, without aligning themselves with any one political party (Allitt, 2003).

African American and Latino Collaborations

With the surge of Latino immigrants in the 1990s, the region of the U.S. most affected was the Southeast (Alvarado & Jaret, 2009).⁶ States such as Georgia, Alabama, Tennessee, and the Carolinas, which previously had had negligible foreign populations, suddenly found themselves experiencing a major influx of Latino immigrants, both from other areas of the United States (primarily the Southwest) and from Mexico and Central and South America (Odem

& Lacey, 2009). Researchers exploring the dynamics of African American attitudes toward the Latinos' presence in various areas of the United States identify a number of points of tension that affect blacks' acceptance of or resistance to the changing demographic reality (Doherty, 2006; Alvarado & Jaret, 2009). In contrast to the negative attitudes among non-Hispanic whites that stem from issues of size and proximity of Hispanic populations, among African Americans the critical factor centers more around relative socio-economic conditions: "Where Latinos enjoy an economic advantage relative to blacks, African Americans are more likely to express racial prejudice toward the group and to engage in defensive political behavior" (Gay, 2006, p. 995). In the southern states in particular, African Americans have recently been confronted with the perceived choice of either competing against Latinos for jobs and limited resources in a "zero-sum game", or collaborating with them on issues of common concern (2006).

The role of African American clergy, then, can have a significant influence on shaping the political views of their congregants. In a study by Wayne State University sociology professor Dr. R. Khari Brown, it was observed that, in years past, black clergy were largely silent on the issue of immigration, either because of a lack of information and direction from their national denominational offices, or for fear of antagonizing congregants who have suffered economic hardships from being displaced by or passed over for immigrant workers (2010). Clergy who have not put the issue of immigration into the larger context of globalization and exploitation by multi-national companies may unintentionally cast the blame for individual economic hardship on the immigrants themselves (2010). Those activist black churches who can tie the issue of immigration to social justice issues such as poverty, racism, urban education and the criminal justice system can shape a more positive attitude toward immigrants among their congregants (2010). Thus, in 2010, the organization of American Baptist Churches USA issued

guidelines and talking points to enable pastors to communicate clearly with their parishioners the need for comprehensive immigration reform (“Continuing Immigration Conversation,” 2010). Also in recent years, other religious groups such as the African American Ministers in Action and African American Clergy for Comprehensive Immigration Reform have taken a more active role in the immigration debate.

The Poverty & Race Research Action Council has identified three strategies for building African-American/Latino alliances: intercultural relationship building (activities in which the two groups come together for common goals); issue-based organizing (addressing specific community needs shared by both groups); and workplace-based organizing (working together on specific work-related issues) (Grant-Thomas et al., 2010). As affirmed in the Georgia State University report, *Building Black-Brown Coalitions in the Southeast* (Alvarado & Jaret, 2009), church leaders of both ethnic groups who can emphasize the commonality of life experiences and shared struggles can begin to build a basis for coalitions and cooperation. This particular report identifies common roadblocks to coalition building such as the language barrier and a lack of perceived need to cooperate, but also stepping stones such as identifying leader bridge-builders, building trust and common goals and developing networks and resources in order to work together (2009). That study features as two of its successful case studies the joint efforts of an African-American pastor and a Latino pastor and their respective congregations in Atkinson County, Georgia, and the outreach efforts of the Beloved Community Center in Greensboro, North Carolina (2009). Ironically, the Beloved Community Center’s efforts to build bridges between African Americans and Latinos in their area have been so successful that the Center has received threats and hate-mail from more conservative groups in the state (2009).

Latino Evangelical Perspectives

Studies indicate that Latino attitudes towards immigration vary according to a number of key demographic differences. For example, older Latino citizens, as well as those who are more acculturated and more educated, tend to favor greater restrictions on legal immigration because of a perceived negative impact on competition for jobs and local tax burdens (Hood et al., 1997). In addition, Hispanics who live in areas with significant illegal immigrant populations also develop more conservative attitudes toward legal immigration (1997). The *Hispanic Churches in American Public Life* (HCAPL) report shows a range of views among Hispanics who identify themselves as religious (Espinosa et al., 2003). According to the HCAPL report, in 2002 there were approximately 25 million Latino Catholics in the U.S. and some 10.6 million non-Catholic Latinos (Protestant, other Christian) (2003).

Typically, Latinos tend to be social conservatives and political liberals but, in recent years, because of the inability of both political parties to resolve the immigration issue, many Latinos have become disenchanted with both parties and have doubts about actively supporting any candidate (2003). In addition, in contrast to the white and African American churches in which typically the leaders are more progressive than the congregations regarding immigration reform, the HCAPL report found that 74% of Latinos want their churches to be actively involved in assisting immigrants, but only 22% of Latinos had been asked by their leaders to get involved (2003). While Catholic church leaders have been public advocates on the behalf of immigrants for decades, evangelical Latino leaders have perhaps not had the same recognition on the issue at the national level; in the last decade, however, they have endeavored to come together in order to garner support for immigration reform from political leaders, white non-Hispanic evangelicals and among their own congregations (Martínez, 2011). Perhaps the most high profile of the

evangelical Latino leaders is the Rev. Samuel Rodriguez, founder and president of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference (NHCLC). According to its web site, the NHCLC includes more than 40,000 member churches and 16 million constituents (“Who we are,” n.d.). Rodriguez actively works both with Hispanic and non-Hispanic evangelicals to advocate and educate on this issue; in addition, Rodriguez is the author of the “Just Integration” immigration policy which recommends a middle-of-the-road solution combining border enforcement with a reformed guest worker program and an earned path to citizenship (n.d.). In the past Rodriguez has clearly expressed his concern over the slowness of non-Hispanic white evangelicals to embrace the issue of comprehensive immigration reform; in an NPR News interview on July 6, 2012, he described his reaction to the creation of the Evangelical Immigration Table:

I remember the early days when many of my brothers and sisters in the faith looked at me and said, Reverend Rodriguez, why don't your people learn how to speak English? Why don't your people obey the rule of law and go back to their countries? . . . In the 1960s, many wonderful conservative evangelical brothers and sisters—they saw political engagement as sinful. They did not engage in the fight and the struggle of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. 'Til this day, there is a divide where African-Americans that adhere to a born again theology will dare not call themselves evangelicals because evangelical—white evangelicals did not support them in the 1950s and '60s. [But] [t]his is a moment where the white evangelical community is saying, we will not permit this narrative to repeat itself with the Latino community. We will stand with you as you fight for comprehensive immigration reform. (“Evangelicals Preach Unity”)

Other evangelical Latino leaders include the Reverend Luis Cortés, Jr., the president and founder of Esperanza, an organization that has reached out to the underserved and marginalized

in the Philadelphia area since 1987; Noel Castellanos, CEO of the Chicago-based Christian Community Development Association; Gabriel Salguero, president of the National Latino Evangelical Coalition based in New York City; and Carlos Moran of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference, among others (Martínez, 2011).

At the same time, however, there is another group of Latino evangelical leaders who do not have the same privilege of public influence as the aforementioned leaders. Latino pastors who themselves are undocumented walk a fine line as they maintain their dedication to their congregations while faced with the reality of possible deportation. In the article “A Delicate Hospitality,” Scheller (2006) describes the “legal and spiritual dilemmas that arise around unauthorized migration” for Latino churches in southern California (p. 48) The author interviewed a number of pastors, some of whom felt that the greater good they were doing outweighed their unauthorized entry into the U.S., and that ministering to all individuals regardless of their legal status, allowing them to survive and support their families, was the lesser of two evils. One pastor included in the article, Daniel DeLeon, explains his position this way:

“I’m not a legal entity for the government. I tell people from the pulpit, ‘Get your papers in order,’ and encourage them to abide by the laws of the land.” But he reserves judgment for the “real illegals”—those who knowingly employ the undocumented (2006, p. 50).

Some Hispanic pastors in Alabama are also reticent about publically challenging the anti-immigrant sentiment in their state (Valdes, 2011). But as anti-immigrant sentiment and legislation spreads from state to state, Latino congregations seem to be finding a new boldness to speak out against unlawful discrimination and in favor of immigration reform. In both Arizona and Alabama, evangelical, mainline Protestant, and Catholic Latino churches have joined together to defend immigrants by providing assistance for them, filing civil law suits, and calling

for repeal of the recent punitive laws enacted in their states (Beaty & Jethani, 2012; Johnson & Biskupic, 2010; Faulk, 2011; Roach, 2012) .

Conclusion: From Perplexing Allies to Potent Allies

Based on the findings presented in this study, the three “tracks” of evangelical involvement in the immigration reform movement that seem to be evolving are comprised of (1) the primarily black/Latino initiatives working for change at the local level on issues of practical, daily concern for their communities, (2) the primarily white evangelical initiatives to mobilize their congregations to express support for immigration reform policies and vote for political candidates who represent their views, and (3) the Latino evangelical initiatives to build consensus among all the groups and bring the issue of immigration reform to a new level of national concern. All of these efforts are essential, and taken together may be the key to gaining momentum for change. In order for immigration reform to become a more prominent issue for law makers, evangelicals need to demonstrate national unity on this issue as they have for the Pro-Life movement and Sanctity of Marriage issues by crossing denominational lines to join forces with conservative Catholics and Jews. In order to bridge the gap between the more progressive and committed leaders of immigration reform and their more conservative congregations, evangelical leaders—Latino, African American and white—will have to be more intentional about communicating from the pulpit to help their followers develop a greater social justice perspective and lose their fears regarding immigrants (which in most cases involves breaking down the language barrier as well) (Alvarado & Jaret, 2009). Another challenge for evangelicals will be to acknowledge and renounce any ingrained political party loyalties and more fully commit to the biblical commands to “love thy neighbor” and care for “widows, orphans, and strangers” by supporting sympathetic political candidates regardless of their party

affiliations (Soerens & Hwang, 2009). The Evangelical Immigration Table has begun efforts to work at the state level with representation in Colorado and Florida and hopes to add more states in the future in order to develop the “critical mass” needed to motivate elected officials to address immigration reform (Warren, 2012). At the same time, just making speeches or writing resolution statements in support of comprehensive immigration reform are not enough: immigrants who on a daily basis confront the stresses related to discrimination, lack of resources, and lack of community support have pressing needs that cannot wait if they are to improve their quality of life here in this country. As many evangelicals—black, Latino, and white—have already come to recognize, the immigration reform movement is the new Civil Rights movement of this century, and this time they all need to get it right by not remaining silent but rather by uniting for the sake of immigration reform for all.

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Endnotes

¹ The history of Asian American evangelicals and their involvement in the immigration debate, while important, is beyond the scope of this current investigation. The reader is referred to the following works for more information about Asian American evangelicals: Janelle S. Wong, “Evangelical Asian Americans and Latinos: Reshaping the Right?” Paper presented at the Cornell University Institute for the Social Sciences Immigration Seminar, 30 April 2012; A. W. Alumkal (2003), *Asian American Evangelical Churches: Race, Ethnicity, and Assimilation in the Second Generation* (New York: LFB Scholarly Publishing LLC).

² The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life also indicates that the ethnic breakdown of U.S. evangelical churches is: 81% white non-Hispanic, 7% Hispanic, 6% black non-Hispanic, 2% Asian non-Hispanic and 4% other/mixed non-Hispanic. The income distribution of members of U.S. evangelical churches shows that over half of members (58%) have yearly incomes of less than \$50,000 (2007).

³ Fundamentalists may not identify themselves as evangelicals because they reject any association with what they perceive as the “social gospel” that also tries to meet the physical needs of people in addition to spiritual needs, a ministry balance that evangelicals accept (Roebuck, 2006). Southern Baptists tend not to self-identify as evangelicals because they define evangelical as an association of a variety of denominations that come together for mutual assistance. Since the Southern Baptist Convention has the resources within its organization to allow it to function independently of any other affiliations, they don’t see themselves as part of the evangelical umbrella (Hankins, 2002; Queen, 1991).

⁴ It was not until 1995 that the Southern Baptist Convention issued an official apology for its tacit support of slavery (Hankins, 2002). In the last twenty years the Southern Baptist Convention has become one of the most ethnically-diverse denominations in the United States (20% ethnic minorities) in part by promoting a stance of dual association for traditionally black National Baptist congregations and directing outreach efforts toward various ethnic groups (Hankins, 2002; Hennessey-Fiske, 2012). They also elected their first African-American president, Rev. Fred Luter of Louisiana, in June 2012 (Hennessey-Fiske, 2012).

⁵ For example, Gardendale First Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention, cooperates with the Central Alabama Hispanic Ministry Coalition; Gina Moran, one of the church's members, is listed as an assistant director for the church's 100 Oaks Hispanic Ministry (Ministries, n.d.). At the same time, another member of Gardendale First Baptist is state senator Scott Beason, one of the sponsors of HB56, recognized as the most oppressive anti-immigrant law in the U.S. (Senator Scott Beason, n.d.). And the Alabama governor who signed the bill into law, Governor Robert J. Bentley, is a Sunday school teacher and deacon at Tuscaloosa's First Baptist Church (Bosch, 2011), also a Southern Baptist Convention affiliate, which allows the Iglesia Latina (Spanish Mission Church) to hold regular weekly meetings in its basement (International ministry, n.d.). According to the pastor of the Iglesia Latina at First Baptist of Tuscaloosa, both the Anglo and the Latino congregations get along well and even work together on community projects (Hiers, 2012).

⁶ According to the U.S. Census, the increase in Latino population between 1990 and 2000 in North Carolina was nearly 400%; in Arkansas, over 330%; in Georgia, 300%; and in Tennessee, South Carolina, and Alabama, 200% (Alvarado & Jaret, 2009).