

# **Biblical witness commands God's people to 'welcome the stranger'**

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**By Patricia Heys**

*Cooperative Baptist Fellowship*

ATLANTA—Professors Daniel Carro and Richard Wilson drew on biblical examples as they discussed immigration issues at a special interest session “Welcoming the Stranger” Feb. 1 at the celebration of a New Baptist Covenant in Atlanta.

“Our question today is who is a stranger,” said Carro, as he showed the audience of more than 90 people a diverse array of faces. “If you can’t define who is a stranger, you can’t define who you should welcome. And friends, I presume that all of us are strangers. Each of us is a stranger to someone else. In the wrong place, in the wrong moment you become a stranger, refugee, alien, non-entity, intruder, immigrant, trespasser, [and an] outlander.”

Carro, a professor of divinity at the John Leland Center for Theological Studies in Arlington, Va., immigrated to the United States from Argentina in 2000 and will be eligible for U.S. citizenship next month.

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“God’s concern for strangers is rooted in the fact that strangers do not possess the typical rights and privileges afforded to other members of the community,” Carro said. “This is why they are vulnerable and why God wants to take care of them.

“Today strangers are not just ignored, they are actively isolated,” Carro said. “Sometimes worse—we build fences and barriers to separate some groups of people from others. Why do we do that? Wasn’t one of the greatest events of our time the falling of the Berlin Wall? We applauded the falling of the Berlin Wall, but now we build walls.

“But the worst wall is not of concrete. The worst wall is a wall of hostility. If

we don't tear down the walls of hostility, other walls will come. In immigration, the biggest battle we face is an internal battle. We need to tear down in our hearts. There is no need for walls. What are we going to do—hostility or hospitality? The choice is ours."

Wilson, a professor of theology at Mercer University in Macon, Ga., met Carro in 1984 while on sabbatical in Argentina. He also provided biblical examples, citing the Old Testament story of Sarah and Abraham welcoming a stranger in their tent, the disciples meeting a stranger on the road to Emmaus and the woman anointing Jesus' feet.

"I encourage you to think with me today what a theology of hospitality might sound like, but what more importantly what it might look like," Wilson said. "A theology of hospitality is, first, a theology of doing and, second, a reflection of what has been done, with the hope that we find God is our midst."

Wilson, a member of the First Baptist Church of Christ in Macon, Ga., provided examples of how his church has reached out to immigrants in their local community. For 20 years, the church provided space for a Korean congregation. Members also teach conversational English classes.

"The surprise of welcoming the stranger is that you find yourself on the receiving end of the welcome," Wilson said. "It takes two to give a hug. To reach out to a stranger is to open yourself to the reciprocal hug."

Former President Jimmy Carter, who attended the session with his wife, Rosalynn, said that in his small hometown of Plains, Ga., there are 80 to 85 immigrants.

"What we really need out of this session is some very tangible and specific recommendations on what participants, individuals, congregations and this entire body of Baptists can do once we return home," Carter said. "The totality of our collective voice speaking out on behalf of undocumented

workers would be very powerful."

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