

Rise of Hispanic evangelicals said influencing immigration debate

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ATLANTA (ABP) — The immigration debate has drawn Latinos into the public square more fully than ever before — and Hispanic Protestants in particular — Gabriel Salguero, a noted Latino evangelical author and thinker, recently told an audience at Mercer University.

Salguero is director of the Hispanic Leadership Program at Princeton Theological Seminary and he and his wife, Jeanette, are senior pastors of The Lamb's Church, a multicultural Nazarene congregation in New York. He gave four addresses at Mercer's Macon, Ga., and Atlanta campuses on Oct. 11 and 12 as the first speaker hosted by the new [Mercer Center for Theology and Public Life](#).

He challenged the thesis of *Who Are We?*, written by the late Harvard University political scientist Samuel Huntington. It claimed that America is defined by an Anglo-Protestant ethic that includes individualism, the English language, hard work and a belief that the country is not a "nation of immigrants," but rather a "nation of settlers" who came to develop a new country based on the rule of law. Huntington

Salguero said followers of Christ from Hispanic and other backgrounds understand they are integrated into the global church rather than assimilated. (Mercer photo)

argued that previous waves of immigrants had assimilated into this settlers' ethic, but a variety of factors led Hispanics to resist this.

Salguero pointed out that followers of Christ from Hispanic and other backgrounds understand that they are integrated into the global church rather than assimilated.

"It is possible to integrate the rule of law with respect for human dignity," Salguero said. "The Scripture has done it all the time. Jesus puts it this way: 'Humanity was not made for the law, but the law was made to serve humanity,' So what we say as people of faith is that if the law is breaking people, then the law is broken."

Latino evangelicals have come to the fore in the public-policy coalitions dealing with social issues as a result of the immigration conversation, Salguero contended.

"The immigration debate has been a watershed moment for Hispanic evangelicals. Before that, they were not really asked into the conversation; they were not part of these national coalitions," he said. "But the immigration debate, for better or for worse, catapulted Hispanic evangelicals into the national scene."

While Hispanic immigrants come from many different regions, religions and worldviews, Salguero said, upon their arrival in America they often develop an identity that is "pan-Hispanic or pan-Latino" in response to political and social pressures. Of the estimated 46 million Hispanics in the United States, as many of 9 million of those may be Protestants, and of those, Salguero said, they are mostly evangelical and charismatic/Pentecostal.



Hispanic evangelical leader Gabriel Salguero addresses students at Mercer University.
(Mercer photo)

While Hispanic evangelicals have long had a history of grass-roots action and community development, the immigration debates have led various political groups to seek them out as partners in changing the debate. It has also served as an impetus for Hispanic evangelicals to organize and expand their own public-policy groups, even though they hold to a wide variety of theologies and political philosophies.

Fueled by their growing numbers and the rise of a new generation that is communications-savvy in English and are American citizens, Hispanic evangelicals have now begun to assert themselves and bring their sensibilities to the argument.

"This tells us that Latino evangelicals are coming of age in engaging the public sphere," Salguero said. "Why? Because we have second-generation Latinos and Latinas who ... are fully hybrid. They pray in Spanish, but they speak English."

Hispanics have a deep understanding of being the outsider, and their varied roots and “mestizo” or mixed ethnic backgrounds help them to understand there is a hybrid nature to culture.

Even their understanding of God is shaped by a difference in translation. The Gospel of John begins, in English, “In the beginning, there was the word” — but in Spanish, “word” is translated as *verbo*, or action word. By exerting their right to migrate — legally or illegally — and by their suffering through this experience and the pains of integration or assimilation, Hispanics have developed a different perspective that adds to the debate, Salguero said.

“Hispanic evangelicals have been arguing for common-sense immigration reform from a variety of perspectives. Number one, from a moral perspective ... it is in keeping with the best Christian understandings of how we treat the stranger. The second is that it is in keeping with the best of U.S. ideals. The third is that it makes sense economically,” he said.

“What Hispanic evangelicals are trying to do, with varying degrees of success and failure, is to stake out their place for an indigenous given-ness, an indigenous particular contribution to the public-policy debate. So when they talk about poverty, they are arguing that there is something particular, there is something indigenous, an experience that they bring.”

-Mark Vanderhoek is director of media relations at Mercer University.

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