

National Network plans next steps to help immigrants

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POTOMAC, Md. (RNS)—Less than a week after joining a lawsuit challenging the Trump administration’s reversal of a policy limiting U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement at houses of worship, leaders of the Latino Christian National Network gathered to plan their next steps.

“We are running a tremendous risk, but we are doing it on principle,” Carlos Malavé, the network’s president, said in Spanish to the annual gathering of about 50 network leaders regarding the lawsuit.

The southern Virginia pastor said he had heard from other groups who were unwilling to join the lawsuit out of fear the Trump administration would weaponize the IRS against them in retaliation. However, he celebrated that his own board’s decision on the matter was unanimous.

The Latino Christian National Network formed as an independent organization in 2021, drawing from a previous Latino subgroup within Christian Churches Together in the USA.

Malavé had been Christian Churches Together in the USA’s executive director. The national network includes Latino leadership within major mainline Protestant denominations and some evangelical and Pentecostal Latino leaders. The board also includes a Catholic advocate.

Involved in sensitive locations lawsuit

While the small network already has several major Latino leaders participating, its national profile is growing from its involvement in the

sensitive locations lawsuit. A recent \$1.5 million grant from Lilly Endowment will also allow the organization to grow its capacity.

In Latino communities, immigration fears are a major pastoral concern. FWD.us, an immigration and criminal justice reform advocacy organization, projected that nearly 1 in 3 Latino U.S. residents could be at risk of family separation or impacted by mass deportations either because of their legal status or that of someone in the household.

Those at risk include immigrants who had previously had temporary permission to be in the United States, whose protections President Donald Trump has revoked.

Alexia Salvatierra, academic dean of the Centro Latino at Fuller Theological Seminary, encouraged the group to take inspiration from the 2006 announcement by Cardinal Roger Mahony, who formerly led the Archdiocese of Los Angeles.

Mahony said the church in Los Angeles would disobey a potential law criminalizing aiding immigrants without legal status, which he believed would criminalize distributing Communion to those immigrants. The bill passed the U.S. House of Representatives but never passed the Senate.

Salvatierra credited Mahoney with turning the tide on the prevailing anti-migrant national narrative. She urged attendees to search for their opening to do the same, especially as they prepared to speak to congressional representatives on Feb. 18.

In those visits, the group urged lawmakers to create a pathway to citizenship for immigrants without legal status, prioritize family reunification within immigration policy, protect refugees and asylum-seekers, ensure due process protections in immigration enforcement, continue to provide foreign aid and preserve significant limits on ICE enforcement in places of worship as a religious liberty measure.

Baptist attorney asserts church property is private

In a presentation about the current immigration policy landscape, Elket Rodríguez, an attorney who leads the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship's migration advocacy, pushed back against prevailing legal advice that church worship spaces during services are considered public, meaning ICE would not need a warrant to enter.

Indicating an openness to test the question legally, Rodríguez cited the First Amendment, the Religious Freedom Restoration Act and several other laws to support his argument that churches are private.

"If the state itself is limiting its authority from the Constitution on down and the Congress has seen the church as a private space when it legislates," Rodríguez said in Spanish, "I can make an easy argument in a court that the church and the state have always had ... a separation."

It remains unclear whether that legal argument will gain momentum, even among network members, as an Episcopal priest in attendance expressed concern the advice differed from what his congregation had heard from its lawyer.

"Our people are overwhelmed," said retired United Methodist Church Bishop Minerva Garza Carcaño, noting that that may be a strategic goal of the Trump administration.

"We're living in an era of the new legitimization of racism," she said, as she expressed concerns about internalized racism as well.

Carcaño spoke on a panel about the state of the Latino church today. Several leaders raised concerns about young people's mental health, related to immigration fears and more broadly.

Anthony Guillén, who leads Latino/Hispanic ministries for the Episcopal Church, highlighted, as a sign of the Holy Spirit's work, the dedication of a Maryland priest, Vidal Rivas at St. Matthew's Episcopal Church, who committed to be the standby guardian for at least 14 children in the event that their parents are deported.

Offering counsel to fearful students

Another panelist, James Medina, national director of Destino, a Latino college student ministry, spoke in his personal capacity about his role shepherding and advocating for students in the midst of the new policy landscape.

"When ICE is on campus and students are scared and fearful, that is my place," he said.

Medina discussed the general difficulty students face from growing up with tension between their Latino heritage and the U.S. context. He said a major challenge involves helping them heal from generational trauma or pain.

Mental health has become a rising concern across the Latino church. Last October, the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference—an evangelical group that, unlike LCNN, has been a strong backer of Trump—launched a mental health initiative at its national gathering.

Daniel Vélez Rivera, an Episcopal priest in Virginia, spoke during feedback to the network panel about identifying mental health services for his community in an area where fewer than 1 percent of mental health providers speak Spanish. In response, Guillén noted the need to "raise up" Latino or bilingual therapists.

"Some of the trauma that our young people are experiencing is because we've caused it, and we have not had the cultural humility to say, 'We got it

wrong,’” Lydia Muñoz, who leads the United Methodist Church’s Latino ministry, said in public response to the panel. “We need to have a come-to-Jesus moment about that.”

Mental health concerns noted

Another area of concern around mental health for network participants was the safety of LGBTQ+ youth, especially related to Trump’s policies. Guillén said his wife, who works at a community college, sees many Latino LGBTQ+ youth living in their cars because their parents have thrown them out.

The discussion of LGBTQ+ issues, however, exposes potential tensions within the network, as some participants come from nonaffirming traditions, such as the International Pentecostal Holiness Church.

Despite theological differences, the leaders said they sensed the Holy Spirit at work in the unity they found in immigration advocacy. Carcaño, the United Methodist Church bishop, said her denomination rarely moves beyond dialogue and prayer about unity with the Catholic Church, but they have recently acted together on immigration.

She said she’d never received a call from a Catholic bishop until last December, when Bishop Mark Seitz of El Paso, who leads the U.S. bishops’ work on immigration, reached out asking United Methodists to join Catholic bishops in writing letters in support of migrants.

“That was a breakthrough for us,” she said.

Illinois Democratic Rep. Delia Ramirez, a member of Humboldt Park United Methodist Church in Chicago, spoke to the group in a recorded video, calling on them to focus on both immediately protecting their communities and “fighting for progress.”

“I’m encouraged that we can be light in dark places,” she said. “And more than ever, it is people of faith that must step in to demonstrate hope, to demonstrate faith, to love our neighbors, to welcome the strangers and to care for the vulnerable communities.”