

Pastors: Stop illegal immigration and offer path to citizenship

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NASHVILLE, Tenn.—As U.S. lawmakers continue to debate the best approach to illegal immigration, most Protestant pastors say the solution should be multifaceted.

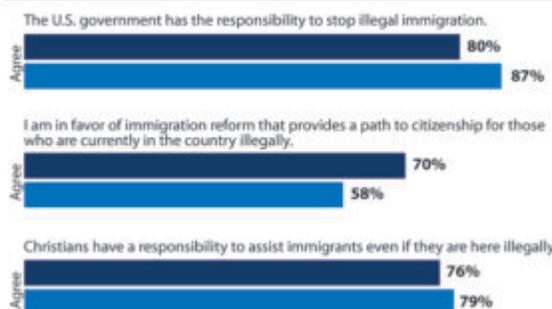
[LifeWay Research surveyed](#) 1,000 Protestant pastors to ask their views on illegal immigration and how churches should view people who are in the country illegally.

Eighty percent say the government has the responsibility to stop illegal immigration, while 9 percent disagree and 11 percent are not sure.

Views on Immigration

Among U.S. Protestant pastors:

2019 2014



LifeWay

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Meanwhile, 70 percent of pastors say they are in favor of an immigration reform that includes a path to citizenship for those who are currently in the country illegally. Seventeen percent disagree and 13 percent are not sure.

Three-quarters of pastors (76 percent) say Christians have a responsibility to assist immigrants even if they are in the country illegally, while 14 percent disagree and 10 percent are not sure.

Currently, about three in 10 pastors say their churches are involved locally in assisting immigrants. Seven in 10 say they are not currently involved.

“Lawmakers have left many of the bigger immigration questions unresolved often voicing ‘either-or’ positions,” said Scott McConnell, executive director of LifeWay Research. “Pastors don’t seem as conflicted desiring improvement in both border security and a path to citizenship for those here illegally.”

Desire end to illegal immigration

While 80 percent of pastors today say the government has the responsibility to stop illegal immigration, that’s down from 87 percent in a [2014 LifeWay Research survey](#).

“Among these questions, stopping illegal immigration registers the strongest sentiment from pastors,” said McConnell. “But support for this is now more in line with caring for immigrants already in the country and establishing a path to citizenship.”

Today, African-American pastors are more likely than white pastors to disagree that the government carries the responsibility to stop illegal immigration (21 percent to 8 percent).

Those in the Northeast (15 percent) and Midwest (12 percent) are more likely to disagree than pastors in the South (5 percent).

Education, age and denomination all factor into how likely a pastor is to say the government bears the responsibility to stop illegal immigration.

Pastors 65 and older are more likely to see that as the government’s job than pastors 44 and younger (85 percent to 75 percent).

Those with a bachelor’s degree or less (87 percent) are more likely than

those with more education (77 percent).

Evangelical pastors (87 percent) are more likely to agree than mainline pastors (74 percent).

Pentecostals (94 percent) and Baptists (89 percent) are more likely to agree than Church of Christ pastors (79 percent), Lutherans (74 percent), Presbyterian or Reformed (74 percent), or Methodists (68 percent).

Provide a path to citizenship

More pastors today favor immigration reform that provides a path to citizenship for immigrants currently in the country illegally.

Since 2014, the percentage of pastors who favor a path to citizenship has grown 12 percentage points from 58 percent to 70 percent today. The percentage who disagreed was cut in half—34 percent to 17 percent.

“For immigrants in the country illegally, there are no real options for redemption,” McConnell noted. “That doesn’t sit well with pastors—the majority of whom were ready for lawmakers to offer a means of making restitution and gaining legal status years ago.”

In 2019, African-American pastors are the ethnicity most likely to agree (91 percent), while pastors 65 and older are the age range least likely to agree (62 percent).

Mainline pastors (80 percent) are more likely to back a path to citizenship than evangelical ones (66 percent).

Methodist (86 percent) and Presbyterian or Reformed (80 percent) pastors are more likely to agree than Church of Christ (65 percent), Baptist (60 percent) and Pentecostal (59 percent) pastors.

Help immigrants—regardless of legal status

Compared to 2014, a similar number of pastors say Christians have a responsibility to assist immigrants even if they are here illegally—76 percent today and 79 percent then.



Primera Iglesia Bautista in Tijuana opened its doors in October 2016 to Haitian immigrants, not only providing food and shelter, but also starting a Haitian congregation to minister to their spiritual needs. (Photo courtesy of Juan Cerrano)

Evangelical pastors are more likely to disagree than mainline pastors (16 percent to 10 percent).

Pastors 65 and older are least likely to agree (67 percent).

Those in the Northeast (85 percent) are more likely to agree than those in the South (74 percent) or Midwest (74 percent).

Holiness (88 percent) and Presbyterian or Reformed (87 percent) are more likely to agree than Lutherans (74 percent), Church of Christ pastors (73

percent), Baptists (70 percent), or Pentecostals (66 percent).

Almost 3 in 10 pastors say their church is currently helping immigrants (29 percent), while 70 percent say they are not.

Mainline pastors (33 percent) are more likely to say they are assisting than evangelical ones (26 percent).

Lutheran (40 percent), Methodist (33 percent) and Presbyterian or Reformed pastors (35 percent) are more likely to say they are helping than Baptist pastors (23 percent).

Pastors of churches with 250 or more in attendance are more likely to say they are currently assisting immigrants than pastors of churches with less than 50 in attendance (37 percent to 23 percent).

“Pastors place just as much responsibility on their congregations as they do legislators,” McConnell said. “More than twice as many pastors say Christians should help immigrants than say their church is personally involved assisting local immigrant neighbors today.”

LifeWay Research conducted the phone survey of 1,000 Protestant pastors January 14-30. The calling list was a stratified random sample, drawn from a list of all Protestant churches. Researchers used quotas for church size.

Each interview was conducted with the senior pastor, minister or priest of the church called. Analysts weighted responses by region to reflect the population more accurately. The completed sample is 1,000 surveys, providing 95 percent confidence that the sampling error does not exceed plus or minus 3.2 percent. Margins of error are higher in sub-groups.