

Haitian pastors decry claim immigrants stealing, eating pets

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MIAMI (BP)—The U.S. Republican presidential ticket’s unfounded claims that Haitian immigrants are stealing and eating pets in Ohio are alarming, harmful rhetoric that “fuels xenophobia and perpetuates damaging stereotypes,” a group of Southern Baptist pastors and other Christian leaders advocating for Haitians globally told Baptist Press.

“We must reject inflammatory remarks,” the Haitian Christian Leaders Coalition told Baptist Press Sept. 12, “and uphold the dignity and respect every human being deserves, including Haitian immigrants.

“This nation was built by the hard work of immigrants, and Haitians have played a significant part in shaping its identity.”

Keny Felix, an HCLC vice president who is also president of the Southern Baptist Convention National Haitian Fellowship of about 500 Haitian churches, lamented the accusations lodged against Haitian immigrants in Springfield, Ohio, by Republican Vice-Presidential Candidate J.D. Vance, and repeated by Republican Presidential Candidate Donald Trump on the global stage in reference to all immigrants in Springfield during the Sept. 10 U.S. presidential debate.

The Haitian Christian Leaders Coalition objects in particular to Vance’s Sept. 9th X post, “Reports now show that people have had their pets abducted and eaten by people who shouldn’t be in this country,” and his post that Haitians were “draining social services” in Springfield.

And HCLC objects to Trump's debate response to moderators' inquiry about immigration: "In Springfield, they're eating the dogs, the people that came in, they're eating the cats ... the pets of the people that live there."

False claims

Both Springfield Mayor Rob Rue and Springfield police have said there have been no reports of such crimes in the city, with the Springfield News-Sun [reporting](#) Sept. 9 that Springfield police had "received no reports related to pets being stolen and eaten."

"We were shocked and dismayed by the statements of Donald Trump," Felix told Baptist Press, amplifying a Haitian Christian Leaders Coalition [prepared statement](#). "We know that words have consequences. Words that are disparaging against any group, let alone a group that is already suffering ... is not reflective of who we are as a people."

Spreading such disinformation can "lead to significant harm" to Haitians in Springfield, Felix said, and is "problematic. It comes down to common sense. But I think it's all reflective of this trend of, whether we call it racism, or whether we call it xenophobia. It's dangerous."

Disappointment

Messengers to the 2023 SBC annual meeting adopted a Bible-based Resolution on [Wisely Engaging Immigration](#), and Felix said it is disturbing evangelicals are not calling out Trump's and Vance's behavior, just as evangelicals critique the leaders' stances on abortion and other policies.

"For me, the disappointing factor is that evangelicals are not calling out the behavior that is not consistent with what we call evangelical life," Felix said, "which is love your neighbor as you love yourself. And so when we fail

to do that, it puts us in a challenging position then to share the gospel—we often say the ospel of love and grace—when we support someone who spews the opposite through their words.”

Trump’s and Vance’s words are reminiscent of statements that were made to denigrate Felix and his peers on middle school playgrounds, he said.

“But to hear this from a national debate stage, which is pretty much a job interview for a role that we recognize as the presidency of the United States, the commander in chief, the leader of the free world,” Felix said, “and to talk in those terms without any regard, it’s very hurtful. It’s very sad.”

Felix and other Haitian Christian Leaders Coalition leaders planned to establish contacts with Springfield community leaders and Haitian civic leaders from across the United States, hopefully in advance of visiting Springfield to collaborate on ways to support the Haitian community there.

Haitian community

Bomb threats forced the [mass closure](#) of Springfield government buildings and schools Sept. 12, and additional [closures](#) of some Springfield schools and other public buildings Sept. 13.

An estimated 12,000 to 15,000 immigrants are living legally in Clark County, Ohio, many of them with Temporary Protected Status, ABC News reported, based on information from government officials.

Low living costs and work opportunities attract migrants to the area, ABC reported, but it wasn’t clear what percentage of the immigrants were from Haiti. The county’s population of about 135,000 includes about 60,000 in Springfield.

Condemnation and advocacy

David Eugene, pastor of Haitian Evangelical Baptist Church in Miami, is president of the Haitian Christian Leaders Coalition, a nonprofit incorporated in April that describes itself as representing thousands of Haitian Christian churches worldwide, advocating for social justice, economic development and civic engagement.

Felix is also senior pastor of Bethel Evangelical Baptist Church in Miami, and is joined as vice president by Jackson Voltaire, pastor of the multisite Grace Connection Baptist Church in the Miami area.

“Our condemnation of these baseless accusations is rooted in our commitment to defend human dignity,” HCLC said in its statement, “not as political ammunition for any party. We uphold justice for all Haitians and urge the public to recognize the Haitian community’s valuable contributions.”

HCLC pointed out Haitians in the United States “play crucial roles as business owners, healthcare workers, educators, and public officials.

“Their efforts not only boost local economies but also strengthen the nation through civic engagement and leadership. These contributions deserve recognition and respect, not defamation through harmful, unfounded accusations.”