

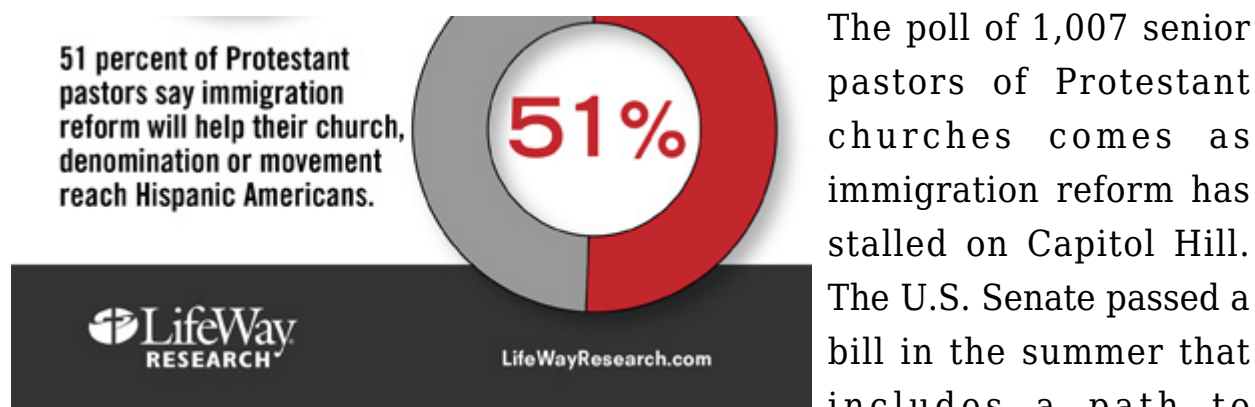
Poll: Protestant pastors support immigration reform

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NASHVILLE, Tenn.—News that immigration reform may be dead—at least for this year—may not sit well in many of America’s churches.

A new poll from Nashville-based [LifeWay Research](#) finds nearly six in 10 senior pastors of Protestant churches support immigration reform that includes a path to citizenship.

Many of those pastors hope reform will help them minister to more Hispanic Americans. But few say the current immigration system hurts current members of their congregations.



A House version of the bill seems dead, despite the efforts of a growing number of high-profile Christian leaders who voiced support.

LifeWay Research found widespread support for immigration reform among clergy.

Fifty-eight percent of Protestant pastors agree with the statement: “I am in favor of immigration reform that includes a path to citizenship for those who are currently in the country illegally.”

Just over half (51 percent) agree with the statement: “Immigration reform will help our church, denomination or movement reach Hispanic Americans.” Among pastors in favor of immigration reform that includes a path to citizenship, 67 percent agree it will help their church, denomination or movement reach Hispanic Americans.

Resolutions in support

Numerous denominations, including the Southern Baptist Convention and the United Methodist Church, have passed resolutions in favor of immigration reform in recent years.

Several national faith leaders, including representatives from the National Association of Evangelicals, Southern Baptist Convention and the National Latino Evangelical Coalition, met with President Obama recently to discuss immigration reform.

Alejandro Mandes, national director of [Immigrant Hope](#), a Minneapolis-based nonprofit that trains churches to assist immigrants, has been working on immigration reform for a decade.

Ten years ago, Protestant pastors and groups like the [National Association of Evangelicals](#) were reluctant to get involved in immigration issues, Mandes said. That has changed as American culture and congregations have become more diverse.

On a mission field

“A lot of congregations have realized that they are now on a mission field,” he said.

Churches will continue to assist immigrants, even if Congress puts reform on hold, Mandes said.

“For me, it is not about politics. It is about the Great Commission and the

great commandment,” he said.

Only 15 percent of pastors say members of their congregations are hurt by the immigration system. Strong disagreement that their church is affected negatively by the current immigration system is highest among pastors in the Northeast (57 percent) and Midwest (49 percent) compared to the South (42 percent) and West (33 percent). About a quarter (27 percent) say immigration reform would help church members.

“Many Protestant churches are predominantly composed of one ethnic group,” said Scott McConnell, vice president of LifeWay Research. “Therefore, many pastors do not have immigrant members, much less members who are personally affected by the current immigration system.”

Mainline pastors are more likely to support reform (82 percent) and to say reform would help church members (42 percent). By contrast, 54 percent of evangelical pastors support reform, while 21 percent say it would help church members.

One in five Hispanics are Protestant

About one in five Hispanic Americans (22 percent) identify themselves as Protestants, according to the Pew Hispanic survey.

Eddie Poole, pastor of [MJLife Church in Mount Juliet, Tenn.](#), became involved in immigration reform because it affects a family in his church. The couple were separated for more than a year after the husband left the country as part of the process of getting legal status. They were reunited after Poole and other church member wrote letters and called public officials and gave interviews to the media on the couple’s behalf.

The Bible teaches Christians they should treat immigrants fairly, Poole insisted. He hopes Congress will make it easier for undocumented immigrants to get legal status.

“As Christians, we are supposed to be kind to immigrants and widows and orphans,” he said. “Part of the problem is that the immigration process is not clear cut. That is not being kind to immigrants.”

Researchers found pastors support reform, even if it does not affect their congregation, McConnell said.

Open to immigration reform

Pastors who disagree when asked if the immigration system has “negatively impacted” church members are quite open to reform. Of that group, nearly six in 10—58 percent—say they still support reform.

This phone survey used a random sample of Protestant churches stratified by church size and denominational groups. Up to six calls were made to reach a sampled phone number. Each interview was conducted with the senior pastor, minister or priest of the church.

Responses were weighted to reflect the geographic distribution and denominational groups of Protestant churches. The completed sample is 1,007 phone interviews and provides 95 percent confidence the sampling error does not exceed plus or minus 3.1 percent. Margins of error are higher in sub-groups.