

2nd Opinion: The hidden immigration impact on churches

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—As Congress makes a final attempt this fall to act on comprehensive immigration reform, the debate is focusing on “securing” our borders and offering a path to citizenship to the 11 million residents here without proper documentation. These politicized arguments, however, don’t see the forest for the trees.

We’re not viewing the broader impact immigration has had on American society. In particular, we’re missing how immigration is transforming the religious life of North America.



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Michaelson retired after serving 17 years as general secretary of the Reformed Church in America. (RNS Photo by Katy Batdorff/The Grand Rapids Press) We commonly view immigration as introducing large numbers of non-Christian religions into U.S. society. True, because of immigration in

the last half-century, America has become the most religiously diverse country in the world, with thousands of mosques and temples dotting our religious landscape.

Yet popular assumptions about the impact of immigration on U.S. non-Christian religious practice disregard realities. Immigration is having its most dramatic religious effects on America's Christian population: An estimated 60 percent of all immigrants arriving here are Christian.

Much has been written about the way growing numbers of "millennials" are walking away from the U.S. church. Yet while millennials are walking out the front door, immigrant Christian communities are appearing right around the corner, and sometimes knocking at the back door. They may hold the key to vitality for American Christianity.

Expanding diversity

Consider this: According to the 1990 Census, 19.7 million people here were born in another country. By 2010, that number jumped to 43 million—74 percent of them Christian, compared to 5 percent Muslim, 4 percent Buddhist and 3 percent Hindu. Immigration's overwhelming religious impact has been to inject expanding diversity and fresh vitality into the country's Christian community.

But it's not just numbers that tell the story of Christian migration; it's also the intensity of their belief and religious practice. In 1960, America was home to only 35,555 foreign residents from Africa. By 2009, that number had grown to 1.5 million, the vast majority of them Christian. Many exhibit a vibrant spiritual life nurtured by practices, traditions and expressions that have been shaped in a non-Western context.

At least 150 African immigrant congregations can be found in New York City alone. The greater Washington area is home to about 250,000 Ethiopians, many of whom worship in 35 Ethiopian churches.

Asian-Americans

According to the 2010 Census, America now is home to 17.3 million Asian-Americans; in the last decade, the Asian-American population grew by 46 percent, a faster rate than any other racial group. Sociologists estimate 44 percent of all Asian-Americans are Christian, and the intensity of their faith commitment is having a striking impact.

About 13 percent of Catholic seminarians are from Asia, and many evangelical campus groups are led by growing numbers of Asian-American students. Of the 5,000 students at Fuller Theological Seminary, one in five is Asian or Asian-American.

There now are 50 million U.S. Hispanics, and 70 percent of them are Catholic. The result: More than one in three American Catholics are Hispanic, and 71 percent of the growth among American Catholics since 1960 is fueled by Hispanics.

Intensity of practice and belief

Again, not only do numbers matter, but also the intensity of practice and belief. An estimated 54 percent of Latino Catholics identify themselves as charismatic, and thus incorporate the practices of spiritual healing, speaking in tongues and gifts of the Holy Spirit.

About one in four Latinos is Protestant, accounting for at least 9.5 million American Christians. There are three times as many U.S. Latino Protestants as Episcopalians. The great majority, 85 percent, of these are Pentecostal or evangelical. Many can be found in thousands of storefront churches and chapels that dot urban Hispanic neighborhoods.

As the Hispanic community is projected to grow to 106 million by 2050, their presence will change the face of American Christianity.

If it were somehow possible to deport the 11 million undocumented immigrants presently in the United States, the result would be to deprive countless Catholic and Protestant congregations of a source of their growing spiritual vitality.

Politicians continue to treat immigration as a problem to be solved rather than a gift to be embraced. Established, mostly white U.S. congregations frequently struggle to retain their members, while immigrant Christians create a picture of growing diversity and vitality. In many denominations, immigrants provide hopeful stories of growth in the face of decline.

Global trends ensure migration, particularly from the Global South to the Global North, will be a growing part of the world's future. And the difficult experiences of migration tend to intensify the religious convictions of those from any faith. Those who believe religious vitality serves to strengthen communities and serve the common good should lead efforts to protect immigrants and enhance future opportunities for the foreign-born to be welcomed to America—and in her churches.

Wesley Granberg-Michaelson is the former general secretary of the Reformed Church in America. His latest book is From Times Square to Timbuktu: The Post-Christian West Meets the Non-Western Church. His column was distributed by Religion News Service.