

Letter from African-American and Hispanic Pastors in Support of Immigration Reform to the President and Members of Congress

June 30, 2010

Dear Mr. President and Members of Congress,

It may seem unusual for African-American, Caribbean American, and Hispanic pastors to forge an alliance for the advancement of comprehensive immigration reform legislation. Politicians, the media, and special interest groups often reinforce the notion that our communities are at odds and in competition for jobs, public resources, and civil rights advancement. These same groups portray immigrants largely as Hispanics who flout the legal immigration system and deliberately displace American workers, damaging the opportunities and freedoms of African Americans. These images are a divisive tactic, used to prevent the possibility of true transformation in our system.

However, there is a reality that unifies us across ethnic lines and drives us to push for justice in this important human rights issue of our day. It is for this reason that Reverend Luis Cortés Jr. of Esperanza For America and Reverend Dr. Derrick Harkins, Senior Pastor of the Nineteenth Street Baptist Church in Washington, D.C., have convened clergy and faith leaders from across ethnic lines to form a coalition in support of comprehensive immigration reform. We know that blaming a particular group of people – rather than acknowledging and addressing the brokenness of our current immigration system – will never lead to real solutions for our nation. We also recognize that fear of those who are different will greatly hinder our nation's progress, and we must actively expose and uproot this element of the current debate.

We have not forgotten our history. Slavery was once upheld as God's way, until enough voices were raised to declare the truth about the injustice and cruelty of oppression. Slavery was followed by segregation, and now we are faced with the idea that the immigrant is a threat to our society – stealing jobs, bringing crime and even disease.

As leaders and men and women of faith, we see immigrants differently. We are called to care for the poor and welcome the stranger, and we stand on the principles of Dr. King and others who proclaim that God gave all people human dignity and value, regardless of race or position in life. This means keeping children and parents together, and establishing pathways by which our immigrant brethren may seek a better life for themselves and their families.

We also believe that showing compassion to the immigrant does not require abandoning fairness and safety. We understand the need for our country to control its borders, and we see the need for real enforcement at the workplace, to protect against unscrupulous employers who lower the bar for all workers by subjecting immigrants to substandard working conditions and

unsustainable wages. We also understand that the 12 million undocumented immigrants who are already living in this country must be honestly addressed, by ensuring that they register with the government, pay taxes and learn English. Finally, we understand that valuing families means we must not tear spouses apart or parents away from their children based on their citizenship status.

For all these issues, comprehensive immigration reform is the solution. It is both practical and just; and it reflects the direction and goals we should desire for our nation. Most importantly, it will begin to liberate us from the divisions we currently face, so we can turn our attention to the real challenge: how to build an economy and society that integrates and rewards anyone who wants to make a positive contribution to our nation's welfare.

So today, we pledge to take the lead in bringing diverse ethnic groups together to support comprehensive immigration reform. We will dispel the myths that allow our fears to be exploited. We will ask our congregants to see the immigrant as Christ does; and we will remind our communities that the true issue is not competition at the margins of society, but how society can expand opportunity for all of us. It is our responsibility to hold our nation's leaders to this higher calling. We pray that President Obama and Congress will do all in their power to bring about comprehensive immigration reform. We pray that our continued efforts in our churches, our communities, and in Washington, will help supply them with the will to do what is right for all people who call this country home.



The Reverend Luis Cortes, Jr.
President
Esperanza



The Reverend Derrick Harkins
Senior Pastor
Nineteenth Street Baptist Church, Washington, DC

Additional signatories:

The Reverend Harvey Clemons, *Pleasant Hill Baptist Church, Houston, TX*

The Reverend William Shaw, *National Baptist Convention USA*

The Reverend Wallace Smith, *Shiloh Baptist Church, Washington, DC*

The Reverend Cecil L. "Chip" Murray, *Professor of Religion & Holder of the John R. Tansey Chair in Christian Ethics, University of Southern California and former Senior Pastor, First AME Church in Los Angeles*

Bishop Orlando Findlayter, *Chairman, Clergy United to Save and Heal, New York, NY*

The Reverend David Bigsby, *Gamaliel Foundation, Chicago, IL*

The Reverend Gabriel Salguero, *Princeton Theological Seminary, NJ*

Servant Brian K. Woodson, Sr., *Founding Pastor, Bay Area Christian Connection, Evangelical Covenant Church, San Francisco, CA*

The Reverend Juan Martinez Ph.D., *Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, CA*

The Reverend Walter Contreras, *Coordinator, Hispanic Ministries, Evangelical Covenant Church, CA*

Lisa Sharon Harper, *Cofounder and Executive Director, New York Faith and Justice, New York, NY*

The Reverend Dr. Samuel C. W. Vassel, *Senior Pastor, Bronx Bethany COTN, Bronx, NY*

The Reverend Dr. Oliver Phillips, *Director, Urban/Multicultural Ministries, Church of Nazarene, Olathe, Kansas*

The Reverend Joshua Rodriguez, *Lead Pastor, The Cityline Church, Jersey City, NJ*

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