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New Coalition of Christians Seeks Changes at Borders

By NEELA BANERJEE

WASHINGTON, May 7 — A new coalition of more than 100 largely evangelical Christian leaders and organizations asked Congress on Monday to pass bills to strengthen border controls but also give illegal immigrants ways to gain legal residency.

The announcement spotlights evangelical leaders' increasingly visible efforts to push for what they say is a more humane policy in keeping with biblical injunctions to show compassion for their neighbors, the weak and the alien.

The new group, Christians for Comprehensive Immigration Reform, includes members like the Mennonite Church U.S.A. and the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference, which represents Latino evangelicals.

It includes individuals like Dr. Joel C. Hunter, pastor of Northland, a megachurch in Longwood, Fla., and Sammy Mah, president of World Relief, an aid group affiliated with the National Association of Evangelicals.

The concerns of the coalition mirror those of many evangelical leaders who have often staked out conservative positions on other social issues or who have avoided politics entirely.

In late March, Dr. Richard Land, the conservative president of the Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, stood with Senator Edward M. Kennedy, Democrat of Massachusetts, in supporting routes to legalization for illegal immigrants.

The Rev. Joel Osteen, whose television ministry reaches millions but who steers clear of politics, has also spoken out for compassionate changes.

Immigration "for us is a religious issue, a biblical issue," said the Rev. Jim Wallis, president of a liberal evangelical group, Call to Renewal, and a member of the coalition. "We call it welcoming the stranger."

Christians for Comprehensive Immigration Reform does not back particular measures, said Katie Barge, a spokeswoman for Faith in Public Life, the organizers of a news conference about the group.

Rather, the coalition calls for bills that would push for border enforcement while improving guest worker programs and offering chances for illegal immigrants to obtain legal status, an approach similar to bills that Congress is considering.

The group advertised in newspapers like Roll Call here on Monday and plans to expand to other papers and radio. It is also trying to present at least 200,000 letters to Congress and the White House on immigration, the first 50,000 of which arrived at the news conference.

The group plans to focus its initial efforts on the news media and church members in Arizona, Florida, Kansas, Ohio and Pennsylvania, because of the high visibility of the immigration debate in some of those states and the pivotal role some of their members of Congress have in the debate.

Evangelical leaders have a delicate balance to strike among their rank and file. A poll in March 2006 by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life found that white evangelicals favored a more conservative policy toward immigrants than other Americans. That position is largely based on concerns that immigrants threaten the American way of life, rather than economic worries, the survey said.

Immigrants, many of them illegal, have flocked to evangelical congregations, and evangelical pastors understand that immigration changes increasingly affect their congregants directly.

The Southern Baptist Convention passed a resolution last year calling for improved border protection and financial and language tests for legalization along with ministry to immigrants, a position most heartily backed, Dr. Land said, by Hispanic Baptists.

John Green, senior fellow with the Pew Forum, said: "There are risks coming out with any positions for evangelical leaders. They risk taking a position that many in their pews don't agree with."

But given the great efforts that evangelicals have been making to reach out to Asians and Hispanic immigrants, Mr. Green added, "if they remain silent, there are great risks as well."