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Houston's Clergy Unites to Urge Support for Immigration Reform

By [JAMES C. MCKINLEY Jr.](#)

HOUSTON — The Rev. John W. Bowie knows it is hard to sell the people in his neighborhood on the idea that they should support changing [immigration](#) laws to give illegal immigrants a path to citizenship. His church lies in one of the oldest black settlements in the city, where unemployment is high and many people see immigrants as competitors for jobs.

Yet there he was in the pulpit at True Light Missionary Baptist Church on the Fourth of July, with a full choir behind him, urging his flock to support an overhaul of immigration laws that “lets the undocumented come out of the shadows.”

“All 13 colonies were made up of illegal aliens because they had not gotten permission from the residents here, who were the Indians,” he said. “Then a few years later, they brought us here and made us illegal, too. These immigrants, we immigrants, have built the greatest nation in the world, coming from everywhere, all over, because, you see, nobody owns this world except God.”

All over Houston, in an unusual display of ecumenical solidarity on an explosive issue, scores of pastors, priests, rabbis and ministers used their sermons on Independence Day to promote the cause of fixing a broken immigration system.

The coordinated effort was part of a broad-based campaign begun in January by an interfaith group, [the Metropolitan Organization](#), to lobby Congress to pass an immigration overhaul package this year. The group has collected 12,000 signatures to be sent to lawmakers and has organized workshops to persuade churchgoers to support their effort.

On June 22, Cardinal Daniel DiNardo, the head of the [Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston](#), made a strong appeal in a letter to the priests in all 150 parishes to address the question in their sermons this weekend. Later, the leaders of the Methodist, Episcopal and Lutheran Churches made similar requests of their ministers. Some Jewish leaders have also joined the campaign.

Many clergy members say they face an uphill battle with their congregations, some of which tend to be conservative on social issues and regard immigrants without visas as lawbreakers. Their effort has also drawn fire from right-wing talk radio hosts.

“It’s not like preaching to the choir, so to speak,” said the Rev. James Bankston, the senior minister at [St. Paul’s United Methodist Church](#) in Houston, a classical stone and stained-glass church with a vaulted roof and a full pipe organ.

Facing a packed church of mostly white faces, Mr. Bankston urged them to try to “find an immigration policy that will fix what is wrong.”

“Knowing how to live with neighbors in our world is never easy,” he said.

Outside after the service, few church members disagreed openly with their minister, though some said the issue was complicated for them. “Obviously, in a church this large, there are diverse feelings,” said Dr. Thomas Leffler, an orthopedic surgeon. “I think there needs to be something changed. It’s not working. The border is basically open.”

His wife, Sandy, chimed in: “Our country has been bad, historically, in encouraging them to come in, for their labor.”

The issue has divided some congregations, as immigrants have begun to worship side by side with members with deep roots in Texas. [St. Thomas Aquinas Catholic Church](#) in Sugar Land, a Houston suburb, has a large number of Mexican, Nigerian and Filipino parishioners, who now share the pews with white families who once dominated the area.

Like many involved in the campaign, Sam Dunning, a deacon, said his hope was “to remove the sharpness from the debate” and remind people of their religious obligation to welcome strangers.

“There is an argument today that those who immigrate or reside here illegally do not deserve to be here because ‘they are breaking the law,’ ” Mr. Dunning said from the altar on Sunday as he looked out at more than 100 people. “While we, too, wish to live in a society ordered by law, it is an unfortunate reality that current immigration policy encourages its very violation.”

How successful the campaign in Houston will be is uncertain. In recent decades, it has become an increasingly diverse city, with whites now barely making up half the population and one in four people foreign born. Yet on the western end and in the suburbs, some of the most conservative and white Congressional districts in the country, politicians win votes with vocal opposition to efforts to grant citizenship to illegal immigrants.

In black communities, there is similar skepticism. Some members at True Light said improving schools and cracking down on crime were much higher priorities than overhauling immigration. Others said the foreign workers were driving down wages and taking jobs working-class citizens needed. “I feel like they are just taking away from us Americans,” said Sherrel Justrice, 49, who attended Sunday’s service.

Mr. Bowie said it would take months to begin to build grass-roots support for an immigration overhaul. A single sermon would not counter what he sees as anti-immigrant rhetoric on the right, he said.

“They are told, ‘They are taking your jobs, they are clogging up your emergency rooms,’ ” he said. “The perception is that this is a Latino problem, not a black problem.”

Daniel Cadis contributed reporting from Sugar Land, Tex.

