

Sanctuary: Mary, Methodists and immigration

by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [October 31, 2006](#) issue

Hispanic Methodists in northern Illinois do not often receive national press coverage. But since one of their number, Elvira Arellano, took refuge from U.S. immigration officials in her Methodist church on the West Side of Chicago, the media have sensed a drama unfolding: Would immigration officials, in their effort to deport Arellano, march into Adalberto Memorial United Methodist Church and drag Arellano and her seven-year-old son away? Is a new civil rights movement being launched, with Arellano playing the part of Rosa Parks?

When I asked the local caucus of Hispanic Methodist ministers, La Junta Hispanoamericana, about events at Adalberto Church, their first response wasn't about immigration. It was about the Virgin Mary. Adalberto's altar space—visible in the television coverage—is dominated by a statue of Mary, covered with rosary beads and surrounded by candles. "It's not Methodist," said Orlando Moller, pastor of El Buen Pastor Church and president of the caucus. "It's Catholic. We Methodists have our own traditions."

Oscar Carrasco, a Hispanic member of Northern Illinois bishop Hee-Soo Jung's cabinet, counseled his colleagues to respect the work of the Spirit at Adalberto and leave the issue of Marian practice for another time. "It doesn't matter how [the people at Adalberto] worship, as long as they're working for the uplift of the Hispanic community," he insisted.

Walter Coleman, pastor at Adalberto, was not present at the caucus meeting. One could understand why: he's busy talking not only to the media but to lawyers who are working on behalf of Arellano, a lay leader in his congregation, in her fight against deportation for being in the country illegally. Coleman and Arellano have referred powerfully to their faith before the cameras, saying, "I fear God much more than I fear the Department of Homeland Security."

The Hispanic ministers eventually approved a nonbinding resolution (the caucus has no doctrinal or disciplinary authority) expressing opposition to Marian devotion and practice and rejecting any form of religious syncretism.

The Methodist hierarchy has eagerly lent its aid to Adalberto's cause. Bishop Jung and Bishop Minerva Carcaño of New Mexico met with the Arellanos and were photographed in prayer with them. But the Hispanic pastors with whom I spoke were not of one mind about the sanctuary case.

How does the place of Mary in Protestant worship become part of discussions about a church giving sanctuary to a Hispanic immigrant? Because conversion from Latin America's deep-seated Roman Catholicism to a Protestant group like the Methodists is such a major cultural and religious shift that any flirtation with Marian practice is seen by other converts as a betrayal. Hispanic pastors may have been trained at liberal institutions like Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary in Evanston or Perkins School of Theology in Dallas, but on this issue they act and sound very much like conservative evangelicals.

One pastor insisted, "If people want masses or images of the Virgin or to observe the Feast of Guadalupe, they should go to a Catholic Church." Another pastor complained that when her ex-Catholic parishioners see Adalberto on TV, with its images and rosaries, they're shocked. "That's a *Methodist* church?" they ask. Another declared that it wasn't until Arellano left Catholic things behind that her eyes were opened and she saw Jesus. When Carrasco commented that it's important to take people where they are and offer cultural symbols reminiscent of home, one pastor retorted: "So we should just tear pages out of the Bible?"

The pastors' concern isn't just that Adalberto Church is misrepresenting Methodist practice in the eyes of their churches' laypeople. It's that Adalberto is too focused on gaining publicity. Enrique Gonzalez, vice-president of the Hispanic caucus, said Adalberto "has always wanted media attention and now they've got it."

Gonzalez claims that Adalberto is known for endorsing a far-left agenda, including independence for Puerto Rico, the cause of Zapatista rebels in Mexico, and Hugo Chavez's populist policies in Venezuela. Gonzalez says his parishioners at El Mesias Church in Elgin suspect that some other Latinos besides Arellano "have taken refuge" at the church "because they're not able to make as much noise in their home countries." He worries that Methodist bishops are unwittingly being used to

bless such agendas.

When I visited Adalberto I saw no signs of extremist politics, but the church is unabashedly political. A banner proclaimed (in Spanish), “Yesterday we marched, now we vote, tomorrow we will bring transformation!” and announced a voter registration drive. Arellano, speaking through a translator at a press conference, declared that “our greatest hope is in new elections and a change toward legalization for 12 million undocumented workers. Those with the right to vote have to come out and change these unjust laws.”

Coleman tells me explicitly, “We have to get control of the Congress.” Coleman, a longtime activist in the city, was an adviser to the late Chicago mayor Harold Washington. He and his wife, pro-immigrant activist Emma Lozano, have taken to apocalyptic language in defense of Arellano. In a letter to the *Chicago Tribune*, Coleman thundered: “A nation that does not take responsibility for its actions is a doomed nation.” Lozano shouted at a press conference that “this nation should be punished” for turning on the very migrant workers it once welcomed.

Concerning the debate in the U.S. Senate on immigration reform, Coleman said: “Not a senator would say we must take responsibility for what we’ve done—100 years of cheap and unprotected labor, 10 of open borders. Elvira walked through a turnstile. And now we want to deport *her*?”

Coleman sees explicit racism at work and points to comments by Pat Buchanan (with whom Coleman appeared on Geraldo Rivera’s TV show) to the effect that the U.S. is experiencing an immigrant “invasion”—a common claim on right-wing radio. Coleman also sees partisan politics at work on the anti-immigration side: “In 1996 Republicans saw that their red states were turning brown,” so they launched a xenophobic preemptive strike. Arellano’s allies think big. Carrasco told the Hispanic caucus that “the story of what this church is doing will be remembered by millions one day.”

Gonzalez suggests that Luis Gutierrez, an Illinois representative in Congress, is behind much of the political theater going on at Adalberto—an effort to bolster Democratic support in advance of November’s elections. (If that’s the goal, it may be failing: the public is mostly opposed to Arellano’s bid for asylum, according to polls taken by the *Chicago Tribune*.)

Gonzalez is also skeptical of Adalberto's claiming for itself the description of "sanctuary church"; every Hispanic church plays that role, he said. "Beyond the immigration debate, beyond the culture, the church is a place where real people express their identity and faith." Regarding Carrasco's defense of the Virgin as a cultural symbol that could help draw immigrants to the Methodist Church, Gonzalez caustically referred to the Virgin of Guadalupe's pre-Christian ancestry: "Could we mix in a little Aztec worship also?"

Whatever their skepticism about Marian practice, the Hispanic pastors all support Arellano's case and oppose any attempt to turn immigrants into criminals. They have differing views, however, on the details of immigration policy. Barb Greicar, a pastor on the city's West Side, thinks it makes sense for the government to conduct background checks on immigrants. "My parishioners don't want people here who are pedophiles," she explains. Gonzalez, however, says a crackdown on immigrants that would involve asking for Social Security numbers would cost him most of his volunteers at church. He vets volunteers personally; he accepts them only after they've participated in church life for several years.

When I asked Coleman about the images of Mary in his church, he argued that the Virgin of Guadalupe is a symbol of resistance to Eurocentric Christianity. "The Spanish hierarchy resisted devotion to her for years," he said.

When I asked Arellano about the church of her baptism, her eyes brightened, and for a moment she left the talking points to which she normally sticks. "I'm still Catholic. I have my rosary, I ask the saints for help. John Wesley was a Father too, with a rosary." I didn't tell her that Anglican priests like Wesley are not Catholic—and don't carry rosaries.

"If I'm in another country I can go to another church," Arellano insisted. "God didn't make churches, just like God didn't make borders."