

Church leaders challenge Alabama's immigration law

by [Bob Allen](#) in the [August 9, 2011](#) issue

Faith leaders have joined a coalition of civil rights groups to file a federal lawsuit challenging Alabama's new immigration law described by Gov. Robert Bentley as the strongest in the country.

Greater Birmingham Ministries, a multiracial organization representing 20 different faith groups, including the Alabama Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, joined forces with the American Civil Liberties Union, the National Immigration Law Center and the Southern Poverty Law Center in challenging the bill signed into law June 9.

The bill, inspired by Arizona's controversial immigration law, will take effect September 1 and empowers law enforcement officials to check the immigration status of individuals. It also makes it a crime to knowingly transport an undocumented immigrant and requires school officials to determine the immigration status of students and their parents, among other provisions.

A class-action lawsuit spearheaded by the Southern Poverty Law Center argues that the law is unconstitutional on several counts. The plaintiffs said the law will lead to racial profiling and unlawful interrogations, searches, seizures and arrests that violate the Fourth Amendment.

Faith-based organizations raised First Amendment concerns about the new law.

"Today, our mission and the missions of many religious groups across Alabama have been made impossible by the recently enacted Alabama immigration law," said Scott Douglas, executive director of Greater Birmingham Ministries. "This law interferes with the free exercise of religion. It violates core values of various faiths because it criminalizes acts of love and hospitality—commandments from our God of many names."

One of the plaintiffs, Ellin Jimmerson, is a minister at Weatherly Heights Baptist Church in Huntsville. Her ministry has included making a documentary film about causes of unlawful immigration. She also preaches to and counsels undocumented immigrants and claims that the bill would infringe on vital parts of her ministry.

Several major religious denominations opposed the new law. Associated Press reported that its critics included United Methodist, Episcopal, Lutheran and Catholic leaders in the state. "It's huge to have the faith community come together and speak out in such great numbers against the new law," said Isabel Rubio, executive director of the Hispanic Interest Coalition of Alabama.

The state's largest religious body, the Alabama Baptist State Convention, has not taken a position on the bill. But Bob Terry, editor of *Alabama Baptist*, wrote an editorial saying that churches seeking to heed the call of a recent Southern Baptist Convention resolution to share the gospel "regardless of country of origin or immigration status" might soon find themselves outside of the law of the land.

"It should not be surprising that an Alabama Baptist missionary declared he is willing to go to jail, if necessary, in order to continue ministering to Hispanics," Terry wrote.
—ABP