

Calls to boycott census split Protestant Latinos: A tough decision for undocumented immigrants

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With less than six months to go before the start of the 2010 census, immigration reform activists—divided over whether undocumented immigrants should volunteer to be counted—are escalating rhetoric as they seek critical support from Latino evangelical and Protestant pastors.

The National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials (NALEO) launched a nationwide campaign October 1 to encourage participation in the census and recruit support from faith leaders. Nonparticipants in the census “cause injury to their community” by keeping public resources from reaching their neighbors in need, said Arturo Vargas, NALEO’s executive director.

The heated exchanges underscore the high stakes of the once-a-decade population count. Communities with large immigrant populations stand to win more representation in Congress and attract millions in additional federal funding under existing formulas. Yet if immigrants avoid census takers en masse, such benefits may never materialize.

The boycott threat “is the only reason why we’re beginning to see some movement in Congress on comprehensive immigration reform,” said Miguel Rivera, president of the National Coalition of Latino Clergy and Christian Leaders (CONLAMIC), which supports a boycott. Rivera says 314 pastors in his network voted unanimously to urge a census boycott, and many others in the CONLAMIC network pledged the same.

[However, in southern California, pastors representing 1,200 Latino Protestant and evangelical congregations announced plans October 19 to urge full participation in the census, according to the *Los Angeles Times*.

[The Network of Latino Pastors, funded by a \$50,000 grant from a community foundation, plans to organize 200 key Latino Protestant churches to promote participation under the banner, “We all count in God’s eyes: Make yourself count!”

[A spokesperson for the Colorado Immigrant Rights Coalition said it was hoping the boycott movement didn’t become a huge issue, the Colorado Independent, an online news Web site, reported. “Only uninformed people would propose something of this nature,” said Chandra Russo. “They’re not aware of the damage they might do.”]

Latino pastors have acknowledged that some immigrants whose native countries are rife with corruption tend to fear that the census information would be shared with immigration authorities. Census officials, however, say all information is confidential.

Tensions intensified over the calls for a boycott when CONLAMIC accused NALEO of spreading “lies” and “terrorizing” undocumented immigrants by suggesting that public services, including funding for public schools, will suffer if immigrants aren’t counted.

“It’s a lie that schools will lose money,” Rivera said. “They’re financed by taxes paid by residents in the community,” including undocumented immigrant homeowners.

Whether undocumented immigrants get counted or not may hinge to a large degree on the advice they hear inside Latino evangelical congregations, observers say. These churches, which often gather in rented storefront spaces, serve as trusted havens for transient populations, including millions of first-generation immigrants, according to Arlene Sánchez-Walsh, associate professor of Latino church studies at Azusa Pacific University.

To date, it’s not clear how much support the boycott idea is gaining in Latino evangelical churches, home to an estimated 7 to 9 million worshippers.

Brazilian immigrant Fausto da Rocha, an evangelist at the Temple of Miracles church in Quincy, Massachusetts, advocates for a census boycott every day on his Portuguese-language AM radio talk show. “We can’t let the government, the politicians, destroy our families,” he said. “More and more families are separated and broken” because of the country’s immigration policies.

Azusa Pacific’s Sánchez-Walsh, however, says support for a boycott is probably lower than claimed, since Rivera and his New Jersey-based efforts are still largely

unknown in the West and Southwest.

Boycott opponents charge that it would be immoral to sit out the count, claiming that to do so would disenfranchise underprivileged Hispanic communities.

The census “should garner a faith response [because] one person answering the census could have an effect on [congressional] redistricting,” and Hispanics need full representation, said Luis Cortés, president of Esperanza, a network of more than 10,000 Latino evangelical congregations.

“It’s an affront to human dignity to make [undocumented people] invisible” by encouraging nonparticipation, added Gabriel Salguero, an evangelical pastor and director of Hispanic programs at Princeton Theological Seminary. “Invisibility is not an option.” -G. Jeffrey MacDonald, *Religion News Service*