

Obama rallies Hispanic Christians on immigration

by [Adelle M. Banks](#)

May 12, 2011

WASHINGTON (RNS) President Obama assured Hispanic Christians on Thursday (May 12) that he hears their pleas for immigration reform, calling it a "moral imperative" that requires action from the pews and the White House.

"What I can do is sign a law," he told more than 600 people gathered here for the National Hispanic Prayer Breakfast. "What you can do is champion a law. What we can do together is make comprehensive immigration reform the law of the land."

Obama, who gave a more detailed speech in El Paso, Texas, on Tuesday about an immigration overhaul, told Hispanic evangelicals that immigration reform must be seen as a moral concern, as well as an economic and security imperative.

"It's a moral imperative when kids are being denied the chance to go to college or serve their military because of the actions of their parents," he said. "It's a moral imperative when simply enforcing the law may mean inflicting pain on families who are just trying to do the right thing by their children."

In recent weeks, Obama has increased calls for immigration reform, meeting with the Congressional Hispanic Caucus and unveiling a 29-page blueprint for "Building a 21st Century Immigration System."

The Rev. Luis Cortes Jr., founder and president of Philadelphia-based Esperanza, the host of the biennial breakfast, said he remains hopeful that Obama may make reform a reality.

"He has set out a challenge, and our hope and desire now is that he will be successful and that we will be able to help him be successful," Cortes said.

He said his organization, frustrated with the inability of Republicans and Democrats to reach consensus, has launched a campaign through Hispanic churches to encourage members to contact Congress to push for legislation.

Another Hispanic leader, who thought Obama's breakfast speech was short on specifics, tied the president's success on reform to his political fortunes in the 2012 election.

Citing the millions of Hispanic Christians in the U.S., Pastor Adan Guerrero of McAllen, Texas, said: "We have power."

Sen. Charles Schumer, D-N.Y., also urged breakfast attendees to help get a bipartisan bill passed: "I need you to give the most fervent sermons you have ever given on this issue," he said.

On separate tracks, the Obama administration and Esperanza are working to broaden support for comprehensive immigration reform by emphasizing the range of Americans who can be mobilized as supporters.

In his El Paso speech, Obama spoke of a "growing coalition of leaders" who may not agree on some issues but have come together on immigration. He said evangelical leaders such as National Association of Evangelicals President Leith Anderson and Illinois megachurch pastor Bill Hybels are among those who have formed a "consensus around fixing what's broken." On Thursday, he cited Catholic, evangelical and interfaith campaigns.

"At critical junctures throughout our history, it's often been men and women of faith who've helped to move this country forward," Obama said.

Esperanza, which spearheaded Capitol Hill lobbying visits by Hispanic evangelicals on Wednesday, held a news conference Tuesday with African-American and Caribbean clergy, and Cortes met with white

evangelical leaders in April.

"We want to make sure that issues of faith solidarity go beyond racial lines," said Cortes. "This is a civil rights issue."