

Baptist film on immigration seeks to get churches talking, helping

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The Rev. German Castro, left, with the Rev. Enoch Fuzz in this 2007 photo, discusses the immigration issue with his congregation. / Jeanne Reasonover / File / The Tennessean

Robert Parham, executive director of the Nashville-based [Baptist Center for Ethics](#), doesn't know how to solve the nation's immigration crisis.

But he knows what he believes.

Christians have a duty to welcome strangers, Parham says, because the Bible tells them so.

Parham's organization recently released [Gospel without Borders](#), a documentary about the immigration crisis. The film weaves Bible passages with the stories of

undocumented immigrants and churches working on their behalf in an effort to put a human face on the issue and connect the topics of faith and immigration.

That could be a tough sell for some. A 2010 Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life survey showed only 15 percent of Protestants and 24 percent of Catholics want to create a path to legal status for undocumented immigrants. Only 7 percent of those surveyed said religion plays a major role in shaping their views on immigration.

The United Methodist Foundation of Arkansas provided most of the film's funding. The documentary also features Baptists, Presbyterians and Catholics. So far, about 5,000 DVDs have been distributed.

Jim Argue, the foundation's president, said his organization gave its grant of \$60,000 to the project because the Baptist Center for Ethics has a history of doing quality documentaries on issues like poverty and interfaith relations. The foundation also wanted church members to apply theology to immigration.

That connection starts with the Old Testament story of the Exodus, when the Jews fled Egypt because of persecution. They were taught never to mistreat strangers in their own country.

The documentary discussion guide points to Bible passages like Leviticus 19:34 to make that point: "The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt."

The film is available in two formats, a 31-minute version and a 53-minute version. The Baptist Center for Ethics website, ethicsdaily.com, also has discussion guides for Sunday schools and church groups to use.

Terry Klefstad, associate professor of music at Belmont University, saw *Gospel without Borders* in her Sunday School class at Immanuel Baptist Church in Nashville. She said focusing on faith first, rather than politics, made sense.

"A lot of times, people who are highly churched approached politics from a political view rather than a biblical one," she said.

Klefstad said people should obey the law and not enter the United States illegally, but most Americans have a personal connection with undocumented immigrants whether they know it or not.

“We all eat fruits and vegetables that they have picked with their own hands,” she said.

This year, the [Southern Baptist Convention](#) passed a resolution calling for immigration reform. The resolution called on the federal government to enforce immigration laws, but it also asked churches to give humanitarian assistance to undocumented immigrants and called for finding a “just and compassionate path to legal status” for those in the country illegally.

Varied reactions

Not all Baptists agree with that resolution or with the premise of *Gospel without Borders* saying that they promote illegal activity.

George Reynolds, a member of Woodmont Baptist Church, said the solution to immigration is simple: Deport any undocumented immigrants.

“I’d like to see us close the borders,” he said. “Anyone who breaks the law should be sent back home.”

Other local churches walk a fine line when it comes to immigration.

The Rev. Germán Castro of El Shaddai Christian Church in Brentwood said he’s told some undocumented immigrants to go back to their families in their home countries because it’s tough to be separated from them. He also teaches his congregation members to obey the laws.

Doing so is not always easy, he said, especially for families where the parents are undocumented and the children are citizens.

“They are good people, they are hard working, they are paying taxes – doing whatever they can to keep things in order,” he said. “The only problem is they can’t get legal status.”

Some Christian leaders say the current immigration crisis seems like it's ripped right from the pages of the Bible.

Ellin Jimmerson, minister to the community at Weatherly Heights Baptist Church in Huntsville, Ala., points out Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus had to flee their homeland and go to Egypt out of fear for their lives.

Jimmerson, who appears in *Gospel without Borders*, said she wants churches to oppose the federal government's efforts to deport undocumented immigrants.

"Ministers have to decided whose side they are on," she said. "Are they on the side of God, or are they on the side of Pharoah?"

The film has gotten a positive reaction so far, said Bishop Anthony Taylor of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Little Rock.

Taylor arranged for the film to be sent out from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops to every diocese in the country.

He hopes it will help ease some of the tension people feel over the issue of immigration. He points out that most Americans are the children of immigrants, who fled their old countries in order to built a better life in America. Modern-day immigrants, whether they are documented or not, are trying to do the same thing.

"I hope there is a conversion of the heart, that people will set aside their fears and connect their experience relate their experience to the experiences of immigrants," he said.

Contact Bob Smietana at 615-259-8228 or bsmietana@tennessean.com.