

How can churches legally minister to illegal immigrants?

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Elvira Arellano
(center) prays
with other
illegal
immigrants in
the kitchen of
her apartment
in the
Adalberto
United
Methodist
Church in
Chicago, April
15 marked the
8th month that
Mexican-born
Arellano, 32,
has been
fighting a
deportation
order from
inside the
Chicago
church where
she has
imprisoned
herself,
invoking the
ancient
medieval
protection of
sanctuary.
(REUTERS
Photo/John
Gress)

How can churches legally minister to illegal immigrants?

By John Hall

Texas Baptist Communications

When the doorbell rings at many churches, a person in need may be standing in the doorway seeking some food, clothes, counseling or encouragement.

If that individual is an undocumented immigrant, his presence presents legal and ethical issues many congregations do not know how to address, said Krista Gregory, consultant with the [Baptist Immigration Services Network](#), started by the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

The network aims to educate church leaders about immigration matters and train Baptists to start church-based immigration centers that would help address people's citizenship status issues.

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“Baptist Immigration Services Network was created to assist churches in providing compassionate, legal and timely ministry to documented and undocumented immigrants of all nationalities,” she said.

“In doing so, we often talk with pastors and church members who struggle with their understanding of Christ’s calling to minister to the least of these and their questions about changing immigration law.”

Encounters with undocumented immigrants happen more often and in more places than people realize, Gregory said. While she receives calls from along the Texas-Mexico border and in major Texas cities, she also has heard from Baptists in New York, California, Georgia, Florida, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Kansas who have questions about ministering to undocumented residents.

“People need to understand the law, but they don’t need to be so scared of the law to not provide adequate ministry,” she said.

Ministers must use some common sense in their ministry. Transporting an undocumented immigrant a long distance away from the border may be prosecutable. Employing an undocumented resident is illegal. Churches must ask about citizenship status of each person they hire.

Also, it is illegal for a church to house undocumented workers in the sanctuary or parsonage.

Ministry to undocumented residents is permissible. A church can give undocumented residents food and clothes and can allow them to be full members of the congregation. A congregation is not required to report undocumented residents. If a minister knows an individual is an undocumented resident, he or she still can minister to that person.

The best advice is the simplest, Gregory said: Don’t ask people about their citizenship status. There’s no need. Since ministers don’t ask every person

they help about their citizenship status, there's no compelling reason why they should when they serve a particular ethnic group.

"If a neighbor wants to go to church, you're going to take them to church," she said. "You're not going to ask immigration status."

In some situations, churches feel they have to choose between performing ministry they feel God is calling them to do and the law. Some congregations have decided to break the law. Others keep it. The choice is theirs, Gregory said.

Adalberto United Methodist Church in Chicago is one congregation that felt it needed to break the law. The church has housed undocumented immigrant Elvira Arellano and her 8-year-old U.S citizen son eight months since she received a deportation order. Federal authorities have said they will apprehend her at a time and place of their choosing.

David Lazo, vice president of strategic partnerships for the [National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference](#), understands why the Chicago church made the decision it did. Congregations are between "a rock and a hard place" when ministering to undocumented immigrants, he acknowledged.

Gregory encourages ministers and church leaders to become educated about immigration law by contacting the Baptist Immigration Services Network. The group can guide Baptists to experts across the country who can help people address citizenship issues and provide insight into what the law says about specific situations. Then, Baptists can make wise ministry choices. "Our churches and our pastors are going to be facing these kinds of ethical decisions."

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