

Latino pastors gather to support full census count

They hope to counter a boycott call that could curtail participation.

By Teresa Watanabe

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Southern California pastors representing 1,200 Latino Protestant congregations unveiled plans Monday to marshal their collective forces to urge full participation in the 2010 census and reject calls to boycott the decennial count.

The pastors, who represent evangelical, Pentecostal and mainline Protestant churches, said they were worried that widespread media coverage of the boycott call might inhibit participation in the census, particularly by undocumented immigrants. The boycott call was launched earlier this year by a national Latino evangelical clergy group to protest the lack of progress on immigration reform.

But the pastors said at a Los Angeles news conference Monday that they would urge participation with a new campaign driven by the motto "We all count in God's eyes: Make yourself count!"

Their group, the Network of Latino Pastors in Southern California, was formed in 2006 to press for immigration reform. The campaign represents the first time most of the pastors have ever taken political action; many say it illustrates the awakening power of the Latino evangelical movement.

The census outreach campaign, funded by a \$50,000 grant from the California Community Foundation, will organize 200 key Latino Protestant churches to develop census materials, train pastors how to promote participation in the count, help congregants fill out the forms and arrange interview opportunities for faith leaders with media.

"We feel God calls us to participate as fully as possible in society," said the Rev. Alexia Salvatierra, director of the Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice of California, a grass-roots alliance of faith leaders that acquired the grant.

Bishop Jose Garcia of the Church of God of Prophecy in Walnut said his denomination supports the census as a way to quantify the growing Latino population and help bring the community more resources and political influence. The census is used to apportion seats in state Legislatures and the U.S. House of Representatives and to allocate more

than \$300 billion in federal funds.

But Los Angeles Latino activist Nativio Lopez said a boycott threat represents powerful political leverage on the Obama administration and the Democratic-controlled Congress to pass an immigration reform bill offering illegal immigrants a path to legalization.

"God bless this network; we respect them," Lopez said of the pastors' evangelical group. "But we absolutely will promote the boycott until we have immigration reform."

Regardless of the boycott, Latino pastors acknowledged that broad efforts are needed to persuade immigrants to participate in the census. Some immigrants, accustomed to corrupt governments in their native countries, fear the information will be shared with immigration authorities or used to deny their children medical help and schooling, according to the Rev. Martin Garcia, former director of Vision L.A., an evangelical organization.

Census officials say all information is strictly confidential. In a recent visit to Los Angeles, Census Director Robert Groves said those pledges are so airtight that census officials in the past even rejected requests by the Secret Service to share information to find a safe neighborhood for then-President Truman's temporary residence.

To assure the wary, Salvatierra said faith leaders will act as buffers between immigrants and census officials as needed by using their churches as census stations and accepting completed forms at Sunday services.

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