

Church workers and the law: Fear on all sides is rampant

by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [June 15, 2010](#) issue

When Governor Jan Brewer of Arizona in late April signed a bill authorizing local police to apprehend people suspected of having entered the country illegally, she brought to national attention the tensions and frustrations that many Arizonans feel when it comes to immigration. These tensions are evident in congregations, which contain a wide range of opinions on immigration policy. The tensions are also acutely felt in congregations that work closely with immigrants and in those that are made up of immigrants.

United Methodists constitute one of the largest mainline Protestant denominations in the state, with about 35,000 members, and they offer a window on church responses to the new law. One of the most vocal critics of the law has been the United Methodist bishop of the Desert Southwest Conference, Minerva Carcaño. For her, the immigration debate is about justice, and the Christian responsibility is clear: to welcome the stranger, care for those in need and provide hospitality to neighbors. The arrival of undocumented immigrants, as she sees it, is the product of a long history of unjust economic practices. To blame people in poverty for seeking to get out of poverty reflects the distorted perspective of the privileged class.

Jim Perdue, who works on immigration and border issues for the United Methodist Church, is glad that his church has taken such a strong stance on the law and on immigration policy. The proper role of the church, Perdue says, is to stand with those who are suffering. “We come to this from the posture that Christ is incarnate in the people who are suffering. That’s where the church is and where the church should be.”

About Arizona SB 1070, the recently passed immigration law, Perdue is unequivocal. “I might be hesitant to use the words ‘persecution’ and ‘oppression’ for the effect of this law, if there weren’t such a strong intent, articulated in the bill, to persecute people in the original meaning of the word, which is to ‘pursue.’ The bill clearly

states that its intent is to chase people out of the state of Arizona, to make sure that they are not comfortable here, that they are not welcome.”

On the first Sunday after the passage of the bill, Perdue was scheduled to preach at a largely Hispanic congregation in the Phoenix area. Normal attendance on a Sunday had been around 70, but on this particular Sunday fewer than 20 came. “People are afraid to come out,” Perdue said. “They are not sure they are safe.”

Those involved in ministries with immigrants are not sure what the new law means. The law makes it illegal to “transport . . . conceal, harbor or shield” undocumented people—and church workers do these things all the time. They drive people to doctors’ appointments and to church or Sunday school and never inquire about someone’s immigration status. Under the law, it appears they could be charged \$1,000 per person for transporting an undocumented person. The law makes certain exemptions for workers in child protective services and for emergency aid workers, said Perdue, but it’s not clear if church workers would fall into this category.

While the law was amended to clarify that police can investigate the legal status of a resident only in the course of investigating a possible violation of another law, such as smuggling or drug running, uncertainty about how the law will be implemented has created an atmosphere of fear.

“Fear on all sides is rampant,” says Pastor Andrea Andress, director of children and family ministries at Paradise Valley United Methodist Church, the largest and wealthiest United Methodist church in the area. In Andress’s congregation, some members are withholding their donations to the church because they object to the strong stance that Bishop Carcaño has taken. Some members are personal friends of the governor. Other members are passionate about social justice and immigration reform. Keeping all these people talking together and worshiping in the same sanctuary is a challenging task.

“For me,” Andress said, “the question is about a balance between being pastoral and being prophetic.” She paused. “Maybe there isn’t a balance.”

At Primera Iglesia, the oldest historically Hispanic United Methodist congregation in Arizona, located in downtown Phoenix, Pastor Rosemary Anderson also has seen signs of fear. Arizona SB 1070 “hit our church really hard. Everybody who is undocumented is scared. Some are being very proactive: they have been protesting, every day all day long, joining marches and prayers. Others have been afraid to

leave their houses.”

She told a story about a family in her congregation that has lived in the Phoenix area for more than 20 years. The family has four children, all born and raised in the U.S. A few days after the passage of SB 1070, the mother of the family was stopped by the police for driving too slowly. She had never been stopped by the police before, nor had anyone in her family. She was asked for proof of legal residency—proof she did not have. The police officer ended up doing nothing, but the woman came home terrified about what will happen in August when the law goes into effect. If a similar incident occurs a few months from now, will she be arrested and deported, perhaps even without her family being notified?

Anderson’s community and her church have been in the midst of major transitions. Many of the congregation’s long-time families left several years ago when the neighborhood became dominated by recent immigrants. The makeup of the church is like that of the surrounding community: it is full of undocumented residents, almost all of whom are poor.

The church serves the community by sponsoring a food bank, a clothing bank and a computer room, and by helping arrange trips to the doctor and providing information on health. Amid the fears, Anderson feels that her first job is to comfort, counsel and educate.

Anderson said it would be foolish to think that the law’s prohibition of “shielding and harboring” undocumented people won’t affect a pastor like her. “I’m the one who takes them to the hospital when they are ill. They come here for food and for services. I don’t need to go out of my way to draw attention to myself, but if taking a stand and caring for people brings publicity, that could be good.”

Perhaps the strongest effect of the law will not be in altering church attendance or current ministries but in polarizing congregations. Anderson is concerned about that possibility at Paradise Valley: “As a pastor, how do you keep the people of God focused on being the people of God? How do you keep people who feel differently and passionately together in the same sanctuary?”

Perdue said that there is almost no chance that churches in Arizona will become de facto document checkers for the state of Arizona. None of the pastors I spoke with intend to comply with a law that they consider unjust and dangerous.

Every year, the Arizona Interfaith Network, along with several church organizations, holds an event at Naco, Arizona, where the U.S. border fence has cut a community in half. Activists cross the border and serve and receive communion. The event is meant to build relationships across the border and demonstrate that a fence cannot keep neighbors apart. Clergy say the conversation should be about what kind of neighbors we are going to be. The time for that conversation is now.