

Bishop Minerva Carcaño on immigration front line

by [Lilly Fowler](#) in the [April 3, 2013](#) issue

When United Methodist Bishop Minerva G. Carcaño talks about tussling with political bigwigs on the topic of immigration reform, she is poised yet forceful.

As the first female Hispanic bishop elected in the nation's second-largest Protestant denomination, Carcaño has had a lot of practice keeping her cool, especially when it comes to discussing divisive politics.

"Immigrants can stay as long as they don't ask for more than we want to give them, and as long they keep serving our needs at whatever pittance of pay we want to extend to them," Carcaño said in an interview in her office in Pasadena, California. "When people begin to say that's not fair, that's not just, then that ruffles feathers."

Carcaño has emerged as a key religious player on the hot-button political debate over immigration reform.

On March 7, Carcaño was among 14 religious leaders who met with President Obama at the White House. (The group included Kathryn Lohre, president of the National Council of Churches; José Gomez, Catholic archbishop of Los Angeles; Samuel Rodriguez, president, National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference; Leith Anderson, president, National Association of Evangelicals; Fred Luter, president, Southern Baptist Convention; and Mohammed Magid, president, Islamic Society of North America.)

Carcaño praised the president for his "courageous leadership" with his executive order last year that granted children of undocumented immigrants the opportunity to remain in the U.S., attend school, work and serve in the military. "Immigration is for young people, for children, for families," she added, as quoted by the National Council of Churches.

While that meeting left the bishop with a sense that "immigration reform is indeed a very high priority for the president," she doesn't shy away from voicing her own

critiques. For example, she says, there is still too much emphasis on securing the border.

Carcaño believes that immigration reform needs to include a way to reunite families that have been separated because of U.S. policies, and while Obama speaks of cracking down on employers who hire undocumented workers, she believes that the labor rights of immigrants need to be respected.

In addition to her role as immigration spokesperson for the United Methodists' Council of Bishops, Carcaño leads the church's California-Pacific Conference, an area that covers much of Southern California, Hawaii and U.S. territories in the Pacific Ocean, such as Guam.

Carcaño, 59, grew up in Edinburg, Texas, not far from the U.S.-Mexico border. Her maternal grandmother was the first Protestant in the family.

The oldest of seven children, Carcaño felt an early call to ministry. But when at age 14 she confessed to her parents that she was contemplating a life of service in the church, her mother cried. Her father's reaction wasn't much better, commanding her, in a fit of anger, to go back to doing the dishes, Carcaño recalls.

Her father, however, also deeply influenced Carcaño's views on immigration. Although he initially came to the United States from Mexico in the 1940s under the Bracero Program which allowed the importation of temporary workers, after the program ended he crossed the border illegally because of financial hardship.

He was, Carcaño explained, detained, threatened and accused of dealing drugs. "He would say to us, 'I've never even taken an aspirin. I didn't know what a pill looked like or a drug looked liked,'" Carcaño said. "The experience on the border really left him scarred for life."

After graduating from the University of Texas-Pan American in 1975, Carcaño earned a master's degree in theology from Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University in Dallas in 1979.

She has served churches across much of the American West, including Oregon and New Mexico, but she says her most challenging role came after she was elected bishop in 2004. That's when she presided over the church's Phoenix-based Desert Southwest Conference, an area that includes parts of Arizona, Nevada and

California.

Phoenix proved to be a difficult place for Carcaño. Traveling with other religious leaders, Carcaño says she angered Arizona Sen. John McCain when she confronted him about the state's get-tough 2010 immigration bill, which allows police officers to check the immigration status of anyone they stop. "A senator can be biting your head off," she said, "but you have to stand by your principles."

Harriett Jane Olson, chief executive officer of the 800,000-member United Methodist Women, praises Carcaño for "really boundary-breaking leadership that she has exercised in a region of the country where it hasn't always gone smoothly."

William B. Lawrence, dean of her alma mater, Perkins School of Theology, says Carcaño holds church members accountable for ministry for "those persons who live at the margins of society."

Others, however, say that Carcaño's views represent only a minority of the church. According to Mark Tooley, president of the conservative Washington-based Institute on Religion and Democracy, Methodists are already defecting at an alarming rate, and the liberal teaching embodied by Carcaño and others is a main reason.

When she was appointed president of the UMC's Western Jurisdiction College of Bishops, Carcaño promised to "challenge statements or actions that offend, denigrate or exclude any person because of the color of their skin, their economic circumstance, their political persuasion, their gender or their sexual orientation."

Tooley said Carcaño's opinions on immigration align with the church's official positions except for her opposition to the church's teaching against gay marriage and gay ministers.

But for Carcaño, it's all part of her belief in an egalitarian view of God's grace that should always be shared with those on the margins—of society or church life. —RNS

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