

Hispanic hopes: Esperanza USA

by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [August 21, 2007](#) issue

In June, Esperanza USA, a national network of Hispanic ministries and churches, sponsored its fifth annual National Hispanic Prayer Breakfast in Washington. The breakfast, which focused on immigration reform, was attended by President Bush as well as several prominent leaders from the Democratic Party. I spoke to the head of Esperanza USA, the Rev. Luis Cortés Jr.

In working on immigration reform, you have brought a diverse group of people to the table. How do you get such different people to talk to each other?

What brings us together is the color brown under the lordship of Christ. Esperanza has biblical, defensible positions, but we do not get involved in the left-right debate. We are a hybrid community. Government and the press keep trying to define us as left or right. They don't think that brown can stand alone.

In your mind, what are the key elements of immigration reform?

The key element of reform is that it be comprehensive. The notion that we could emphasize border security without addressing the whole situation is absurd.

Our organization does not have a problem with border security. The U.S. is a sovereign nation. If we want to protect our borders, then Citizenship and Immigration Services and Homeland Security need to hire enough people to do it and train them well. I, for one, don't want untrained civilians running around with guns. We can create government jobs for highly trained people who can give water to the person they find in the desert and then escort that person back to his or her home country. If that's the national will, let's do it.

But there are 15 million individuals who provide this nation with work who are living in fear. I speak around the country at churches, especially in border states. When I am speaking I remind the congregation of the jobs that illegal immigrants are doing in this country—jobs like that of dishwasher and hotel cleaner. People realize that they don't want to do those jobs themselves and don't want their children to do

them—though it is legitimate, necessary and honorable work.

Your organization has worked on a large number of issues related to Hispanic life over two decades. What do you identify as the most hopeful trends?

Hispanics in American have become a lot more mature on political issues. We are a group that tends to hold on to Christian values. We are people who are involved in faith as an important part of daily life. In addition, more of our folks are getting through glass ceilings. We are more integrated into the American fabric of life. We are perhaps slowest in the area of denominational leadership. But Latino cultures are becoming more and more accepted; Hispanic words, foods, music are becoming part of American life. Some are recalcitrant about the change that has always been a part of our country, but Latinos are working hard in all aspects of society—developing nonprofit organizations and becoming the fastest-growing small-business community. Their work helps all of us.

How has Esperanza developed over the past 20 years?

It began in 1981 when I was a faculty member at Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary and working with the Hispanic theologian Orlando Costas. We created an organization that would give Hispanic clergy in Philadelphia a chance for fellowship with one another. At first we just met together, but then we decided to be proactive, and we created Nueva Esperanza. We got involved in issues of voting, police abuse, drugs in our communities—some of the clergy were beaten up by dealers. We worked on representation in city employment and on community reinvestment. Then we started offering direct services, beginning with mortgage counseling, and today we have a very diverse portfolio of services.

We came to realize that we couldn't rely on money from either Hispanic churches or denominations. Denominations don't have enough money to fund and support a minority ecumenical movement. We needed a Hispanic organization that could fund the faith-based groups doing work all over the country. We now have a network of 10,000 congregations from 27 denominational and judicatory organizations—from Episcopal churches to independent churches. We give out \$3 million in grants to these agencies every year, and as far as I know we are the largest grantors to Hispanic groups in the country.