

AG Eric Holder, black church leaders mull voter law changes

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c. 2012 Religion News Service WASHINGTON (RNS) Attorney General Eric Holder and other legal experts strategized with black religious leaders on Wednesday (May 30) about new restrictive state voting laws that could affect their congregants by reducing early voting and requiring identification.

"I would argue that of all the freedoms we have today, none is more important or more sacred than the right to vote," Holder told about 200 people gathered for a meeting of the Conference of National Black Churches and the Congressional Black Caucus.

He acknowledged concerns about new voting laws and said his department has launched more than 100 investigations about racially discriminatory voting practices.

"In jurisdictions across the country, both overt and subtle forms of discrimination remain all too common -- and have not yet been relegated to the pages of history," said Holder, the nation's first African-American attorney general.

Black church leaders, who long have been involved in voter registration efforts, are ramping up their work to address legal changes across the country.

"There is an absence of awareness in our community that there've been changes," said the Rev. W. Franklyn Richardson, chairman of the Conference of National Black Churches. "This is going on below the radar of the African-American community."

The Brennan Center for Law and Justice at New York University School of Law estimates that as many as 5 million voters will be affected by the new voter laws, with about two dozen passed in 18 states since 2011. Although voter ID requirements are most prominent, some states have cut back on early and absentee voting opportunities, or required proof of citizenship.

"We want to work with you to ensure that no more doors are closed," Nicole Austin-Hillery, director of the Brennan Center's Washington office, told the black clergy gathered from across the country.

She and other legal experts urged churches to get involved at all levels of the voting process, from registering voters to encouraging congregants to be poll workers and election judges.

Rep. Emanuel Cleaver, a United Methodist pastor and Missouri Democrat, said some churches are doing fundraising to help people meet requirements of the new laws.

"One of the things is taking up offerings in church to pay for the purchase of government-issued ID, which in some cases will cost \$20 or more," Cleaver said in an interview.

The Rev. Stephen Thurston, president of the National Baptist Convention of America, said state presidents of his denomination are getting involved in educating congregants about the changing voter laws.

"We cannot allow this distraction to stop our people from voting and we are preparing to assist them in whatever they need to do to meet the qualifications," he said.

Bishop McKinley Young, who oversees African Methodist Episcopal congregations in Florida, said he's working with a range of denominational leaders to deal with the reduction of early voting from two Sundays to one in the next election.

"We're going to make the Sunday we do have into the best Sunday in the world," he said of the initiative that's been dubbed "souls to polls."

The NAACP is working with the National Baptist Convention, USA, to respond to the new voter laws by working to increase voter participation by minorities and elderly and young people.