

# Evangelicals press Congress on immigration

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c. 2012 Religion News Service WASHINGTON (RNS) Evangelical activists are pressing Congress to pass a comprehensive immigration reform plan -- a tricky election-year issue that conservatives' GOP allies have been reluctant to take up.

The so-called "Evangelical Immigration Table," which includes evangelicals Jim Wallis on the left and Richard Land on the right, unveiled its plan Tuesday (June 12) on Capitol Hill.

Citing a biblical call to protect the stranger living in a foreign land, the statement on immigration reform signed by 140 evangelical leaders urges respect for immigrants' humanity while obeying the rule of law and providing for national security.

Though the group is reaching out to evangelicals, Congress, and the president, there's not yet a specific framework in place.

"Much, much work remains to be done on the specifics," admitted Tom Minnery, senior vice president of Focus on the Family. "As difficult as it was getting all these signers together, the next step, getting politicians together, is a much greater task."

Wallis, president and CEO of the social justice organization Sojourners, said change will depend on evangelicals uniting together for the cause. "Big things don't change in Washington first. They change in the nation's capital last," he said. "Together we will create a national groundswell for comprehensive immigration reform."

Evangelicals could comprise a huge voting bloc, representing 26.3 percent of all Americans. However, immigration may not be an important election issue: Recent polls show jobs and the economy are voters' top issues influencing their vote for president.

Despite being in the U.S. illegally, many of the estimated 11.5 million unauthorized immigrants have become an integral part of American society, the faith leaders argued. At the same time, immigration often tears families apart as individuals are deported. The faith leaders called for a faith-based solution for a moral, economic, and political issue.

When asked how evangelical voters might square immigration with other hot-button issues such as abortion and gay marriage, Land, who heads the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, said it's a matter of individual conscience.

"That's a decision that each individual person has to make," he said. "We tell people they need to vote their values, their beliefs, and their convictions. When they're faced with a choice where they agree on some and not on others, they need to prayerfully decide for themselves what their hierarchy of issues are."