

# Panel: Stand Up to Unjust Immigration Laws

As part of New Baptist Covenant II, the Oklahoma City satellite location hosted an ecumenical panel Friday to discuss immigration.

With the EthicsDaily.com documentary "[GospelWithoutBorders](#)" as a backdrop, panelists were asked to respond to key themes in the film, and were then asked for a Gospel response to the issue.

The panelists represented four distinct Christian traditions: Roman Catholic, United Methodist, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and Baptist. Bruce Prescott, director of Oklahoma Mainstream Baptists, was moderator and participant.

The panelists spent most of their allotted time discussing the relationship between civil laws, the relationship of the church to those laws, and the higher demands of justice.

Rev. Tim Luschen of St. Charles Borromeo Catholic Church in Oklahoma City said that laws are important, but the law isn't always absolute.

"The challenge for Christians is to live in a culture where civil laws conflict with religious laws or principles," Luschen said. "It's difficult, because as in the case of immigration, following religious principles can make us seem unpatriotic."

Stan Basler, director of the Criminal Justice and Mercy Ministries of the Oklahoma Conference of the United Methodist Church (UMC), said the mistake is to assume all laws, even civil and criminal, are moral.

"The film points out that segregation was once the law," Basler said. "If we aren't vigilant, we can get very far from the Gospel in our laws."

Paraphrasing James Madison in "The Federalist Papers," Basler said the function of law is to do justice. He said the law is not always absolute, especially "when we fragment it from the idea of justice and deify it."

Prescott offered his insights from more than 20 years of police work as an officer in Albuquerque.

“Police officers care about the law,” Prescott said, “but it was my experience that we tried to build rapport with the undocumented community because they were and are the most vulnerable to exploitation.”

Prescott reminded attendees that the Southern Baptist Convention passed a resolution to support comprehensive immigration reform at its annual meeting in Phoenix, Ariz., this year.

Calling it a good sign, Prescott said the church must impact legislation to ensure laws concerning undocumented people are fair.

Michael Girlinghouse, bishop of the Arkansas-Oklahoma synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), called on attendees to think of the immigration issue in human terms.

“I was impressed with the Mexican consul’s statement that we should be sitting together with our neighbors, not building fences so we can’t see our neighbor,” Girlinghouse said.

He was referring to Andres Chao, formerly the consul general of Mexico in Arkansas, who was interviewed for “Gospel Without Borders.”

“So often in these discussions we forget that we are dealing with human beings created in the image of God, not numbers,” Girlinghouse said. “These are not objects filling a role in our world; they are humans whom God loves. We have to resist the urge to vilify those who fill certain roles, and we have to treat them as human beings.”

Girlinghouse said the church must begin to answer questions about the human issues, of which he listed three. Why are they coming? What do they need? How can we help?

To follow up, Prescott asked the panelists to summarize their traditions’ responses to immigration. Luschen, Basler and Girlinghouse said their traditions all strive to respect laws and the sovereignty of nations, but all three traditions also place justice ahead of civil laws.

Luschen said: “Sovereign nations have a right to control their borders, but it’s not an absolute right. The Catholic tradition has been looking at this issue since Pope Pius XII said people have a right to migrate in the 1950s. The consistent teaching

has been that people have a right to migrate to find opportunities.”

All three agreed that the rights of workers must be protected, and Girlinghouse said the ELCA specifically addresses the issue of reuniting families and integrating the marginalized.

Basler said the UMC also adds the goal of resisting all “Arizona Plus” type laws.

“Our focus is based on the biblical passages about aliens and sojourners,” Basler said. “Sovereign nations do have a right to protect borders, but I believe a primary goal of biblical law is to see that every person’s basic needs are met. If the person crossing the border can find no other lawful way to survive, or live at a sustainable level, the crossing does not seem to me to be against God’s will.”

All attendees were given a copy of “Gospel Without Borders,” released in August by [EthicsDaily.com](http://EthicsDaily.com) with major funding from the [UnitedMethodistFoundationofArkansas](http://UnitedMethodistFoundationofArkansas).

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For more information about the documentary, including a free discussion guide and church resources, go to [GospelWithoutBorders.net](http://GospelWithoutBorders.net).