

Churches out of step, Tancredo says

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**By M.E. Sprengelmeyer, Rocky Mountain News
February 22, 2006**

WASHINGTON - Rep. Tom Tancredo has accused leaders of some of the country's biggest religious denominations of being out of step with their own followers on the issue of illegal immigration.

Tancredo, a Littleton Republican, released a statement Tuesday blasting the U.S. Catholic Church, Episcopal Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, United Methodist Church, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society for lobbying against a border-enforcement bill that passed the U.S. House of Representatives last year.

"The faith community must step forward and tell leftist activists that undermining border security is not a religious imperative," Tancredo said.

"I call on the conservative majority of churchgoers to contact the activists who are misrepresenting their beliefs."

Various religious groups have lined up against the House-passed bill, which calls for building a fence along portions of the U.S.-Mexico border, plus tougher enforcement against illegal immigrants and those who employ them.

The Washington, D.C., office of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) issued an alert to members saying, "This enforcement-only bill is anti-immigrant, unfair, and unjust."

Elenora Giddings Ivory, of the denomination's Stewardship of Public Life advocacy program, said the church's position on immigration is based on the scripture passage Matthew 25, verses 31-46, which talks about nations being judged, in part, by how they treat strangers.

"We have a position that supports compassionate immigration policy. So any bill that comes forward and does not fit with a compassionate understanding of immigration policy would be held up to that," Giddings Ivory said.

She said a bill pending in the U.S. Senate, by Sens. John McCain, R-Ariz., and Ted Kennedy, D-Mass., comes closest to meeting the church's ideal, based on its proposed guest-worker plan. The Catholic bishops also support that bill.

The Senate is expected to begin debating immigration legislation as early as next month. Then its version must be reconciled with the House-passed version.

"Joseph and Mary had to flee persecution. Jesus was not born in his home community," Giddings Ivory said. "Jesus and his family perhaps would have been locked up with a strict border approach to immigration."

But that kind of argument offends Tancredo, a member of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church.

"As a person of faith, I was offended by these radical advocates invoking God when arguing for blanket amnesty," Tancredo said. "If we really want to be a compassionate faith community, we must enforce the law and end the border charade that lures hundreds of people through the deadly desert every year."

Tancredo, leader of the congressional Immigration Reform Caucus, has vowed to fight various guest- worker plans, including McCain- Kennedy language, calling them tantamount to amnesty for people who broke the law to get into the country.

Jeanette R. De Melo, communications director for the Catholic Archdiocese of Denver, said the church does not support "blanket amnesty" for illegal immigrants, adding, "The idea that the choice is between completely 'open borders' or (a) homegrown Berlin Wall is misguided. Neither option is practical or just."

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