

Most Reverend Anthony Evans

National Black Church Initiative

Yesterday in the Washington Post, General Pete Pace, the Joint Chief-of-staff chairman of the U.S. Armed Forces broke down and cried in front of a Congressional hearing on immigration. He was weeping because he was describing the opportunities that this country has given his family. He said, “there is no other country on the planet that affords that kind of opportunity to those who have come here.”

In 1965, the Rev. C.T. Vivian stood on the steps of a courthouse in Alabama with an angry white mob standing behind him. He prayed for the souls of America, when its daughters and its sons, because of the color of their skin, could not register to vote. These two scenes in the American life happened 30 years apart, but they are the typical scenes of men and women who have fought for the right to be here in America.

This issue of immigration sparks the heart of American democracy. If we cannot honor the destiny and the foundation of our country’s principles by welcoming the Blacks, the Italians, the Latinos, the Hindus, and the Buddhists, we will have failed the very essence of what our forefathers Hamilton, Washington, and Jefferson and Adams set out to do, what historians call the “Great American Experiment.” This experiment worked because we were willing to take chances, leaving our fate in the hands of God.

The Black church was born out of racism and persecution. I have come to represent that persecuted church, the same church that Rev. C.T. Vivian did when he stood on the courthouse steps. He did this because he was trying to save the soul of America. We cannot save the soul of America if we allow our Latino brother and sisters to be ostracized, banned and deported. We must ensure that America lives up to those principles that General Pace affirmed and C.T. Vivian prayed for.

This movement is not about immigration; it is about the soul of America. If America decides to close its doors to those who yearn for the same principles that everybody over the past 200 years came to America to inherit, then America will stop being America, that unique experiment, a light of hope. It will grow dim in the eyes of the world, and eventually go out, engulfing the nation in darkness and those who stand at the door, knocking.

I’m also here on behalf of 65,000 African American churches, to declare support for a God-centered, loving, and merciful immigration bill for all Africans, Latinos, Pakistanis and everyone who sits at America’s door, knocking to be let in.

It is very important that during these discussions we are not blinded on the central issue at hand. The issue here is the fight for comprehensive immigration for all undocumented workers in the country, and to produce a balanced immigration policy. We cannot, under any circumstances, let those who are on the right try to divide the African American community from the Latino community. On this issue we stand together.

There are those who would love to divide our community between brown and black, but we will work to make sure that this does not happen. Just recently, I wrote the Mayor of Los Angeles, Mr. Villaraigosa, asking him to call together 20 major African American leaders and 20 major Latino leaders to begin to discuss our differences and move toward a covenant relationship. We want this coalition to be in place long before the 2008 presidential election. If we unite on this issue, there is no way that they can deny us a just and balanced immigration bill, but if we allow them to divide us, it would not only hurt us, but our children and the yet unborn. We must never allow division of language and culture, myths and misunderstandings, to get in the way of advocating for a comprehensive immigration bill and the renewing of the Voting Rights Act of 1964. We must never again allow our Haitian brothers and sisters to suffer the indignity, while their Cuban brothers and sisters of the same immigration status are accepted as full members of our society. We will stand together and we will not let them divide us.

Ladies and Gentlemen: they are not just knocking at the door, they are here, and the law says that they are here illegally. The Bible teaches us that we must respect civil law, that law is good and honorable. I understand and accept that. Laws keep society whole and orderly, but when laws seek to divide, when they damage the soul, distort the personality and undermine God's intention for his children, they are unjust laws. The bill in the House of Representatives is an unjust bill, because it will distort and destroy families, it will cause pain and hardship. It will not reflect the character and principles of our forefathers. It will not be as welcoming as America was to General Pace's family and will reaffirm the hatred directed toward its African American citizens. Martin Luther King Jr., were he alive today, would call this bill wrong, morally wrong. When the law does not uplift and affirm, when it is uncompassionate, it is unjust. When the law affirms and is compassionate, it is just.

As a church leader, I am given the power to interpret God's revelation concerning public policy. We must apply these criteria to every law: is it just, compassionate and merciful? This bill fits none of God's criteria.

I want to appeal to those who would vote for such an unjust law and deport 13 million of God's children with no regard for their souls. C.T.'s prayers in Alabama were for generations to come, for the soul of America and American cannot be America until you live up to what you stand for. We have never been a country who has turned away those escaping persecution or those escaping hopelessness and despair. We have always been a welcoming country to those who want to affirm their community and humanity. You know as well as I that the Latino people are not lazy. They work everyday, sometimes two jobs a day. They uphold their contract with America: if they work hard, take care of their families and uphold our laws, we will be just and afford them a chance in this country, based upon the dreams of our forefathers.

Recently I wrote a letter to Senator Frist of Tennessee (May 23, 2006). I asked, "Whatever you do, please let these three guiding principles guide your mind heart and soul:"

- 1) The immigration laws of the United States must be followed and respected, but if those laws punish a group of people unjustly, then the church is compelled to fight for a just solution through the proper legislative channels. The Bible teaches that all Christians should obey civil law.
- 2) Whatever legislation comes about, it should not arbitrarily break up families or consider their entry into the United States criminal. Our Latino brothers must be treated with the highest form of American democracy, in alignment with the great American tradition of being fair-minded in our rulings. It would be unfortunate and wrong to criminalize the actions of our Latino brothers and sisters when they have been so victimized by their illegal status in the U.S. and their native lands.
- 3) All undocumented individuals should be given an opportunity to prove themselves a benefit to this country and deserving of citizenship without undue or harsh obstacles. The legislature must take into consideration the economic burden that they presently face. To add additional taxation to this particular group of individuals, in most cases, could be the final blow, resulting in poverty, something that they fled in their native countries. This bill must bring those individuals some comfort and hope and not create a path to instability, neither in their souls nor their families.

As I take my seat. I want you to understand something. I stand with my Latino brothers and sisters because I know you know the right thing to do. I stand because I am convicted by the scriptures, which teach us that we have to show mercy, walk humbly and do justly. We beg you in Christ to not deport 13 million of God's children, but to embrace God's gift to the Latino people for our country. This will make our country a better country, a greater country, a God-loving country.

God bless and keep you. May He continue to smile upon you.