

June 1, 2017

The Honorable John F. Kelly, Secretary
Department of Homeland Security
United States Government
Washington, DC 20528

Dear Secretary Kelly,

This Sunday marks the global church's celebration of Pentecost. As Hispanic pastors leading evangelical churches and organizations across the country, we believe this symbolic celebration holds sacred principles on which we as a country should reflect in light of the present deportation priorities and ICE presence in our communities.

The recent implementation of your memo dated February 21, 2017, expanded the definition of criminal in such a way that it has led to the arrests, detentions and deportations of immigrants by ICE that has not only included undocumented immigrants with serious criminal histories but pastors, hard working mothers, fathers, DACA recipients and numerous other immigrants with low-level or no criminal offense records. These deeply troubling and erratic actions have resulted in paralyzing fear in our churches and communities and do not reflect the values we as pastors hold dear, nor do we believe it is congruent with the values of the United States of America.

Pentecost is the day of celebration in churches around the world to mark the arrival of the Holy Spirit after the death, resurrection and ascension of Christ. This important day in the Christian calendar highlights the unity we as Christians share as a result of the work of Christ which connected us with God and then united us with one another, through the Holy Spirit.

Christ's work on the earth made room for a new way, beyond the Levitical Law. No longer bound to written laws on tablets, the law of God was now written on each person's heart eliminating divides and unifying all people regardless of race, language or culture. As pastors we eagerly seek to practice this oneness within our congregations and the broader community.

While we acknowledge that our desired unity is a spiritual one, borders and laws are a present and necessary reality. We thank you for your leadership and know that yours is a significant role keeping our country safe from those who would want to harm the United States both inside and outside of our borders. However, there are millions of undocumented immigrants, living within our country's borders who present no threat to safety but instead contribute to our communities and our country in significant ways.

Millions of undocumented immigrants have lived in the United States for over two decades, they pastor churches, run tax-paying businesses, own homes and properties, and have US citizen children. Their long-standing presence and leadership have become a vital presence in our communities yet they and their children live in crippling fear as a result of the recent deportation implementation priorities. Fears are valid, families are being separated and we need your help.

We need your help to prioritize violent, non-contributing undocumented immigrants to be deportation priorities and not those who are contributing to their community, supporting their families and hold no threat to human life or the country's welfare. We need your help to ensure that sensitive zones remain safe from ICE presence.

The United States is a nation of laws and we respect those laws but not every law is a good law and our immigration laws demonstrate some of the most un-redemptive, unjust laws in our country today with the level of consequence far outweighing its infraction. While the law may be broken, the consequences of the infraction of the law has discretion under your leadership. As the leader who is informing ICE how to implement the law, we are asking that you please define criminal behavior clearly and fairly, taking into account the seriousness of the infraction and the implications for the family and community if someone is arrested, detained or deported.

As pastors, we have hundreds of undocumented colleagues who are pastoring Latino and immigrant congregations in our country whose leadership is not only valued and needed at the local level but at the denominational level as well. As we come to this shared, sacred Pentecost celebration, leading congregations, celebrating our oneness in Christ, our hearts are heavy that while we may be equal under God we are not equal under the law. Because of this incongruence we stand in solidarity with our undocumented brothers and sisters, actively working to change the laws of our country so that they reflect the restorative justice so aptly needed in our immigration system today. But standing is not enough.

For years we have worked with our Congressional delegations under the past three Presidents advocating for change to the broken immigration system. We will not stop fighting unjust laws, but while we wait for reform, we ask that you would help our colleagues and other immigrants like them who work to support their families and move their lives forward. We share your sentiments regarding Congress and their inaction on immigration. We agree with your statement that Congress, "should have the courage and skill to change the laws," but we ask for that same courage and skill to be applied to your efforts as you inform and enforce immigration priorities to ICE.

It is essential that sensitive zones stay sensitive. The recent presence of ICE officials at Vida Church, an evangelical church in Sacramento on Mother's Day, May 14, 2017 was an example of the effects that the presence ICE has on church communities' confidence in coming to worship together. We have learned from the spokesman for ICE in San Francisco, James Schwab, that "the officers were unaware" that where they were parked was a church and that sensitive locations should "generally be avoided," but we are asking that they be avoided. Additionally, places like schools, hospitals, libraries and churches should be safe not only for those who are undocumented but for all people gathering in those spaces. People regardless of status should be able to utilize services provided at these types of locations without fear or hesitation. We ask that sensitive locations have no ICE presence without warrant.

As we gather this weekend to celebrate Pentecost, the arrival of the Holy Spirit who bridged the human divide of race, language and culture, we will specifically pray that God's wisdom and courage will guide you as you lead the Department of Homeland Security. We will pray these prayers alongside the prayers for our undocumented brothers and sisters who live in fear of being separated from their families, and for mercy and justice to be central to both the law and its implementation.

We thank you for considering our requests. Furthermore, we offer ourselves as a collective resource as you consider your implementation of the executive orders. We also request a meeting with you to dialogue about the pressing immigration issues that continue to invoke fear and separates families. We look forward to hearing from you. Your reply can be mailed to: CCDA 3827 W. Ogden Ave., Chicago, IL 60623, ATTN: Noel Castellanos, or via email to Noel@ccda.org.

Sincerely,

Rev. Luis Cortez, President & CEO
Esperanza USA

Rev. Gabriel Salguero, President
National Latino Evangelical Coalition

Dr. Noel Castellanos, President
Christian Community Development Association

Bishop Jose Garcia, Senior Advisor for Prayer & Strategic Initiatives
Bread for the World