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North Texas religious leaders step up to speak out against state's SB4 immigration law

Written by Elvia Limon, Staff Writer

The Rev. Jesus Belmontes has seen up close the anxiety, pain and suffering of those who fear calling the police.

A woman married to a U.S. citizen told Belmontes that she was afraid to report her husband's abuse of her. He said the woman's husband threatened to call U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials on her if she turned him in.

And when another woman visiting his San Juan Diego Catholic Church in northwest Dallas earlier this year had her truck stolen from the church's parking lot, she refused to call police, he said. She was afraid officers would ask her immigration status and deport her.

Belmontes said anxieties spread like an epidemic within his all-Hispanic, 8,000-member congregation in May after Gov. Greg Abbott signed Texas' sanctuary cities ban, also known as SB4.

The measure, which takes effect Sept. 1, will punish cities, counties and universities that prohibit local law enforcement officers from asking about a person's immigration status. Police chiefs, county sheriffs and constables who violate the ban could face a criminal charge, and local jurisdictions could be fined up to \$25,000 a day for each violation.

Abbott and other supporters of the law say Hispanics should not fear it. They say the measure is not intended to frighten law-abiding people, but to make Texas cities safer for them.

Stories like those of the two women are why Belmontes and some other North Texas religious leaders have taken it upon themselves to organize forums and other resources to provide factual information about — and help with — the law.

"People consider the church as a place where they are safe," Belmontes said in Spanish. "The church is where they tell us their stories to unburden themselves, because we know they are looking for us as a father or someone who can give them solace and hope in that moment.

"I don't just know this from the news," Belmontes said. "I know this because I see it, I hear it and I live it with the community that is affected, and with the children who are growing up with these fears and these traumas."

Belmontes, who is a Dallas Area Interfaith leader, said that organization has made it easier for him to connect and share stories with other religious leaders who have demonstrated solidarity, even if their church members aren't necessarily affected by the law.

"We don't know how all of this is going to play out, but that's why we are moving to initiate a change within the different churches, so we can bring support and organize ourselves to change the situation," he said. "We can't preach the Gospel and look the other way or act like we don't care."

Trying to help

More than 700 people from all over the Dallas-Fort Worth gathered on a recent Sunday at Southern Hills Church of Christ in Pleasant Grove for one of the forums, led by the DAI. Dallas Police Department Deputy Chief Gary Tittle spoke about a variety of concerns within the community, including several that were SB4-related.

Tittle reminded attendees, many of them wearing headsets provided by a Spanish-language translating service, that victims of crimes, witnesses and callers to 911 cannot be asked for their immigration status under SB4.

"Call the police, that is what I say to you," Tittle told the standing room-only crowd. "If your car is broken into, if you're a victim of a crime or if you see or hear something that you need to report on, call 911."

Senior minister Jonathan Morrison of the Cedar Crest Church of Christ was among the religious leaders at the forum that afternoon. Although most members of his east Oak Cliff church are African-American, Morrison said he has felt the need to be part of the SB4 conversation.

He said the Hispanic community's current distrust of the police is an issue that warrants the attention of other communities, too.

"For us this really strikes a chord because we've had an opportunity to hear experiences from those impacted by SB4 have shared with respect to crime and being afraid to report crime," Morrison said. "That's really reminiscent with some of the challenges we face in the African-American community."



The Rev. Jesus Belmontes of San Juan Diego Catholic Church in Dallas in his church's sanctuary. He has joined other religious leaders in expressing his concerns about SB4, the Texas immigration bill about sanctuary cities.



Senior minister Jonathan Morrison, with the Cedar Crest Church of Christ in east Oak Cliff, in his church's sanctuary. (Ron Baselice/Staff Photographer)

By joining forces with other religious leaders and hearing the experiences and concerns of others, Morrison said, Hispanic and African-American residents can take a step forward in building a trusting relationship with law enforcement.

"Our fears come from different sources, but the results are the same in that there is fear," he said. "We all want to enjoy a quality of life that does not include a fear in law enforcement."

Ultimately, Morrison said, he hopes forums like the ones hosted by DAI will help people realize how much power they have to set an agenda.

"Just like we've risen up against what we believe to be injustice, it is only human and Christian to do the same for our Latino brothers and sisters who may be sharing some of those same experiences," he said.

A continuous fight

The Rev. Michael Forge, the pastor at Mary Immaculate Catholic Church in Farmers Branch, said in addition to having round tables and bringing in law enforcement officials to talk to his parishioners, his church also prays during Sunday

Mass specifically for migrants who might be living in fear of police.

Forge said that anxiety by the Hispanic and immigrant communities is familiar to him. In 2006, Farmers Branch city leaders voted for a controversial ordinance that tried to require prospective renters to provide proof that they were legal U.S. residents when obtaining an occupancy license.

Tenants or landlords who violated the ordinance would have been fined \$500 per day. The ordinance led to a costly seven-year legal battle before it was finally deemed unconstitutional by a federal court in 2014.

"My parishioners, Spanish-speaking particularly, lived through all of that," Forge said. "They lived in a time when there was a real sense of scrutiny based on ethnicity, and so they lived SB4 before SB4 was in." Pastor Lynn Godsey's church, Templo de Poder, is in Ennis, but he has traveled throughout the state to express his opposition to SB4.

From a wheelchair, Godsey spoke out against the sanctuary cities ban at the state Legislature earlier this year, attended Dallas' Mega March in April in support of immigrant rights and has held several



The Rev. Michael Forge of Mary Immaculate Catholic Church in Farmers Branch is helping to lead the fight against SB4 in the Dallas Diocese. (Ben Torres/Special Contributor)



Pastor Lynn Godsey talks to evangelical pastors during an immigration forum at Iglesia Palabra de Vida in Dallas on July 10. (Elvia Limon/Dallas Morning News)

forums at various Dallas-area churches — including his own — since the law was signed.

His most recent immigration forum was on Monday, where more than three dozen pastors from different churches around Texas discussed their SB4 concerns with an immigration lawyer, the Mexican consulate and members of the Dallas Police Department.

"We as pastors are involved in SB4 because it's going to divide hundreds of thousands of families," he said. "It's ungodly to separate children from their parents. It's inhumane." Godsey said he hopes other religious leaders will stand up against SB4, which he called the most "wicked, anti-church, anti-family and anti-immigrant" law in the nation.

"We are going to battle this thing with whatever we got," Godsey said. "Gov. Greg Abbott took on a battle that he will regret and he will lose. It's him against God's churches."