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ON RELIGION

Trying to Build Bonds With Immigrant Stories

By [SAMUEL G. FREEDMAN](#)

OAKLAND, Calif.

On the last Sunday before Christmas, from an altar flanked by Advent candles and potted poinsettias, the Rev. Clarence L. Johnson preached to the Mills Grove Christian Church about the Nativity. A precise and measured man, Mr. Johnson departed just once from his typewritten text.

In the midst of recounting a certain birth in ancient Judea, the minister placed his gaze a dozen rows back into the congregation and rested it on a dark-haired woman in a patterned blouse. He called her by name, Luz, and then he went back into his sermon, to words he had surely chosen with her in mind.

“Joseph was warned by an angel of the Lord that Herod, the king, was searching for the young child in order to destroy him,” Mr. Johnson said. “He was instructed to get up and take the baby and his mother, Mary, and flee into Egypt and remain there until it was safe to return. This, then, becomes a refugee story, a story of immigrants, a young family having to escape the dangers of their native land and relocate to a strange new place.”

Throughout the stucco church, among the hundred worshipers, nobody needed a concordance to grasp the minister’s meaning. Earlier in the morning service, they had heard from Luz Dominguez herself. Or, more accurately, they had heard her through the interpreter who translated the testimony of a Mexican immigrant to a congregation of African-Americans.

“I am a woman of faith,” Mrs. Dominguez, 45, had said from the pulpit, “and I am here to speak to you with my heart in my hands.”

Then she told a different kind of Christmas narrative, one about being suspended from her job as a hotel housekeeper 10 days before the holiday in 2006. Officially, the reason was that the [Social Security](#) number Mrs. Dominguez had provided to the hotel did not match federal records.

The timing of the suspension, which was followed two weeks later by her firing, also coincided with the efforts of Mrs. Dominguez and dozens of co-workers to have the hotel comply with a local living-wage law that would have reduced their workload.

Three years later, the dispute remains unresolved. Mrs. Dominguez now works at a different job and fears a return visit from [immigration](#) agents, who have surprised her at home once already. And while she said nothing overt about her immigration status, the audience could surmise that even after 15 years in America it

fell somewhere short of legal.

Her testimony took just four or five minutes of the service, leaving plenty of time for hymns, poetry recitation by the children, collection of offerings and the distribution of the wine and wafer known in many Protestant churches as the Lord's Supper. But when Mrs. Dominguez's brief part ended, there was applause.

Applause was part of the point. So was the response at the congregational lunch after the service. Over rice and gumbo, about two dozen members of Mills Grove signed letters to Bay Area members of Congress endorsing immigration law change, an issue that [President Obama](#) is expected to revive in 2010. The letterhead, quite deliberately, consisted of a verse from Deuteronomy: "Therefore love the stranger, for you were once strangers in the land of Egypt."

Mrs. Dominguez had spoken at Mills Grove as part of several related programs in the Oakland area intended to enlist African-American churches in support of immigration change and, at a more personal level, to neutralize the resistance many blacks have felt toward advocacy for immigrants, especially illegal ones, who are perceived as unfair competitors for manufacturing and service-industry jobs.

Over the past year, immigrant workers like Mrs. Dominguez have told their stories at 10 black churches in the Oakland area under a program called Labor in the Pulpit, overseen by the [East Bay Interfaith Committee for Worker Justice](#). Another local advocacy group, the [Black Alliance for Just Immigration](#), has held dialogues with members of 15 black churches over the past three years.

What underlies both of these initiatives has been the sense of disengagement, sometimes ranging to antipathy, on the immigration issue among African-American churches. In part, these churches see more than enough challenges meeting the needs of blacks during the severe economic downturn. In part, they see Latino immigrants as adversaries.

"We get 'They're taking our jobs,' " said Gerald Lenoir, director of the Black Alliance for Just Immigration, recalling his conversations at churches. "We get, 'They're overwhelming our social services, they're taking over our communities, they're calling it a civil rights struggle, and what about our struggle?'"

Black church leaders have come up with answers both idealistic and pragmatic. Brian K. Woodson Sr. pastors a church, the Bay Area Christian Connection, that is near Chinatown in Oakland and shares its building with a Vietnamese congregation. To him, the immigrants make more sense as allies on issues of economic justice than as rivals.

By bringing immigrants like Mrs. Dominguez into church, sympathetic blacks have been able not only to put a human face on the immigration issue but also a face that is brown-skinned and Christian, affirming two common bonds. The attacks on Latino immigrants on talk radio and cable TV have also encouraged a certain dynamic of "The enemy of my enemy is my friend."

"Whenever we see our brothers and sisters being treated wrongly," Mr. Johnson said in an interview, "it's incumbent on us to raise our voices. For those of us who've been involved in the struggle and have gained benefits from that struggle, we feel it's right to pass the benefits along."

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