

# Hispanic Baptist leaders say loss of 'sensitive locations' rule hurts Church

FORT WORTH, Texas (BP) – The loss of a rule that prevented officials from entering churches to arrest immigrants accused of being in the U.S. illegally has hurt the Church's witness, the National Hispanic Baptist Network (NHBN) said Jan. 29 in calling for the rule's reinstatement.

The NHBN, a group representing more than 3,300 Southern Baptist churches, released its statement in Spanish and English nine days after the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) overturned a 14-year-old rule that had prevented such arrests at and near sensitive locations including churches and schools.

Attendance at Hispanic congregations has already declined since the DHS revoked the protections Jan. 20, NHBN Executive Director Bruno Molina said in releasing the statement to Baptist Press.

"People are rightly concerned. They think they're going to get arrested at church," Molina told Baptist Press. "That's why we're asking DHS to revoke the revocation, as it were, because people should be allowed – even if they are considered criminals – to seek spiritual guidance.

"And there's no reason why, if they are looking to arrest somebody, they can't wait until they exit the Bible study or church service and arrest them at least a block from the church location."

In its statement posted at [rednbh.org](http://rednbh.org), NHBN recognizes a need for community safety, proclaims a biblical authority of law enforcement and concurrently embraces the religious liberty

Southern Baptists also extol.

“We recognize that, on the one hand, government ‘does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil (Romans 13:4).’ On the other hand, we also recognize that God is ‘not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9),’” the statement reads.

“Consequently, it grieves us deeply that our churches are no longer protected and that anyone would be denied their opportunity to receive spiritual guidance in our churches for fear of being arrested. We respectfully and strongly exhort DHS to reinstate the ‘Sensitive Locations Protections’ for churches so that we can fulfill our God-given mission to minister to the least of these and the stranger among us.”

Brent Leatherwood, president of the Southern Baptist Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, has said that while the immigration system needs revisions, the revocation of the sensitive locations protections causes problems that are best avoided.

“No church that I’m aware of harbors criminal actors, whether they’re here legally or illegally, and no church leader wants that,” Leatherwood told Baptist Press shortly after DHS revoked the protections. “President Trump is right to fix our broken immigration system – something we’ve long called for – but it must be done so without turning churches into wards of the state or expecting pastors to ask for papers of people coming through their doors.

“The unintended impact of this change will be that many law-abiding immigrants will be fearful to attend our churches, and our central mission of Gospel proclamation and biblical formation will be inhibited.”

Leatherwood also offered Baptist Press general remarks on a better way to achieve intended goals.

“The best way to go about this is a comprehensive approach that rids our country of dangerous illegal criminals, sets up strong protections at our borders and welcomes those who are fleeing persecution,” Leatherwood told Baptist Press. “Not only can this be done in a way that respects religious liberty, it is something that would be strongly supported by our churches.”

Leatherwood described the revocation of sensitive locations protections as “the type of move that leads to more questions and confusion than anything.”

Molina appreciates that the Southern Baptist family is hearing the concerns that more adversely impact Hispanic Southern Baptists.

“We’re all Southern Baptists,” he said. “I think this is something that needs to be brought to the forefront so that, first of all, it’s addressed because it’s a Kingdom issue – our ability to get the Gospel out – and also so that Hispanic Southern Baptists particularly who are disproportionately impacted by this know that the denomination does have their back.”

Molina described the DHS revocation and the applicable protocol as very fluid, with some national news reports indicating law enforcement officers are looking only for individuals with outstanding warrants for criminal charges, and others indicating they are simply looking for those suspected of being in the country illegally.

Documented immigrants “are also anxious,” Molina said, “because you see the reports on TV, on both English and Spanish networks, where the people who are detained are sometimes even citizens or have legal status, but they get kind of caught up in the dragnet – they ask for their papers and things of this nature – and intimidated, and then they’re let go.

“But it has also raised the level of anxiety among legal immigrants.”

Southern Baptist messengers to at least six annual meetings have adopted resolutions on immigration, most recently the 2023 resolution “On Wisely Engaging Immigration.” While no resolution has necessarily broached the subject of arrests during worship, a clause in the latest resolution states that messengers “commend the good work of Southern Baptists among immigrants and refugees and encourage pastors and their congregations to continue sharing the Gospel and providing Christlike care for the countless men, women, and children in harm’s way.”

The NHBN full statement follows in both English and Spanish.

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Statement on the Revocation of the “Sensitive Locations Protections”

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) recently revoked the “Sensitive Locations Protections” policy, which was designed to ensure that immigration enforcement actions do not occur at, nor are focused on, sensitive locations such as churches. The policy protections that were removed extended to churches, religious services, funerals, weddings, or other public religious ceremonies.

As a network of Hispanic Ministry Leaders, we recognize the need for the safety and security of our communities. At the same time, we expect the government to respect a church’s religious liberty to minister to their community and maintain the sanctity of our worship spaces.

Our churches are welcoming spaces where all are encouraged to experience God’s grace and repent of their sins. We recognize that, on the one hand, government “does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings

wrath on the one who practices evil (Rom. 13:4).” On the other hand, we also recognize that God is “not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance (2 Pet. 3:9).” Consequently, it grieves us deeply that our churches are no longer protected and that anyone would be denied their opportunity to receive spiritual guidance in our churches for fear of being arrested.

We respectfully and strongly exhort DHS to reinstate the “Sensitive Locations Protections” for churches so that we can fulfill our God-given mission to minister to the least of these and the stranger among us.

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## Declaración sobre la revocación de las “Protecciones de Ubicaciones Sensibles”

El Departamento de Seguridad Nacional (DHS, por sus siglas en inglés) revocó recientemente la política de “Protecciones de Lugares Sensibles”, que fue diseñada para garantizar que las acciones de aplicación de la ley de inmigración no ocurran ni se centren en lugares sensibles como las iglesias. Las protecciones de la póliza que se eliminaron se extendieron a iglesias, servicios religiosos, funerales, bodas u otras ceremonias religiosas públicas.

Como una red de líderes del ministerio hispano, reconocemos la necesidad de la seguridad de nuestras comunidades. Al mismo tiempo, esperamos que el gobierno respete la libertad religiosa de una iglesia para ministrar a su comunidad y mantener la santidad de nuestros espacios de culto.

Nuestras iglesias son espacios acogedores donde se anima a todos a experimentar la gracia de Dios y arrepentirse de sus pecados. Reconocemos que, por un lado, el gobierno “no lleva en vano la espada pues es un servidor de Dios, un vengador para castigo del que hace lo malo (Rom. 13:4)”. Por otro lado, también reconocemos que Dios “no desea que nadie perezca, sino

que todos procedan al arrepentimiento” (2 Pedro 3:9). En consecuencia, nos duele profundamente que nuestras iglesias ya no estén protegidas y que a cualquiera se le niegue la oportunidad de recibir orientación espiritual en nuestras iglesias por temor a ser arrestado.

Exhortamos respetuosa y encarecidamente al DHS a restablecer las “Protecciones de Ubicaciones Sensibles” para las iglesias para que podamos cumplir nuestra misión dada por Dios de ministrar a los más pequeños y a los extraños entre nosotros.