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EVANGELICAL, CATHOLIC LEADERS PRESSURE GOP ON IMMIGRATION

By Laura Meckler
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Religious leaders who favor an overhaul of immigration laws are stepping up their pressure on House Republicans, aiming to move the stalled legislation and show that the GOP could pay a political penalty for inaction.

This weekend, Hispanic evangelical pastors will preach a "call to action," asking churchgoers to call members of Congress to demand passage of a broad immigration bill.

The program is being organized by the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference, which encouraged its 34,200 member churches, representing 16 million members, to participate. It is unclear how many will do so.

On Wednesday, nearly a dozen Catholic bishops and archbishops representing the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops are sending a letter to House members, urging them to move immigration legislation. The letter is also signed by evangelical leaders.

The Senate passed a sweeping immigration bill last summer but the issue had been stuck in the House ever since.

"The frustration – it is no longer simmering, but it's boiling over," said the Rev. Samuel Rodriguez, president of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference, who is meeting next week with GOP congressional leaders. "The consequences are both moral and political."

In their letter to House members, the religious leaders wrote: "Common-sense fixes to our immigration policies are long overdue."

On Tuesday, a similar letter was sent to lawmakers from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and more than 600 business associations and companies.

Last month, many religious leaders applauded House Speaker John Boehner (R., Ohio) when he released a set of principles to guide an expected debate in the chamber on immigration legislation. Less than a week later, however, Mr. Boehner said it was unlikely legislation could pass this year, essentially putting on the back burner an issue that would divide the GOP, which has a majority in the House, in an election year.

A spokesman for Mr. Boehner, Michael Steel, replied that the speaker wants to tackle immigration but that Republicans don't believe President Barack Obama would carry out all elements of a new law.

"Right now, there is widespread doubt about whether this administration can be trusted to enforce our laws, and it is going to be difficult to move any immigration legislation until that changes," he said.

The change in course angered many evangelicals, particularly Latinos, said Rev. Gabriel Salguero, president of the National Latino Evangelical Coalition. "The right thing to do was sacrificed on the altar of political expediency."

Mr. Rodriguez said, "You really gave us hope, and then you took it away."

For years, Evangelical Christians have strongly supported Republicans. Hispanic evangelicals are much more likely to support Republicans than are other Latino voters, according to polling by the Pew Research Center.

Leith Anderson, president of the National Association of Evangelicals, says that could change. He said that older evangelicals may be aligned with the GOP, but Republicans risk alienating younger religious voters. "These young voters, who are increasingly concerned about justice issues, are the activists," he said.

Other religious leaders are hesitant to blame Republicans for the failure to pass an immigration bill. Archbishop Thomas G. Wenski of Miami, who also signed the letter to House members, said both parties share blame for failures over the years.