

African immigrants work to define their place in diverse US church

TUCSON, Ariz. – Immigrant African Catholics in the United States are working to define a place for themselves and their cultures amid the melting pot of the U.S. church.

At an annual gathering of African Catholics in the U.S. in Tucson July 16-18, the several dozen participants from around the country heard from local and national speakers, prayed and brainstormed about the possibilities for the budding network created by the National Association of African Catholics in the United States, a two-year-old organization.

Judge Ronald Wilson of the South Tucson City Court, for example, encouraged participants to take an active role in their communities at a variety of levels, particularly in supporting immigrants as they traverse the criminal justice system and as they deal with the complexities of the immigration system.

Many at the gathering came from the small African Catholic community in Arizona, where the local news during the conference was overwhelmingly dominated by stories about the pending enactment of S.B. 1070, the state's new immigration law.

The law is scheduled to take effect July 29, though several pending lawsuits seek to derail that. It requires police officers to question the immigration status of suspects stopped for another offense if there's a "reasonable suspicion" they are in the country illegally.

Several participants questioned Wilson about the law, noting that it is broadly seen "as pertaining only to Latinos, but the victims may be of African origin as well."

Wilson was asked how the African community can protect itself against the possibility of racial profiling and harassment.

Sidestepping a political discussion of the law, Wilson encouraged the use of grass-roots action to protect immigrants from being treated unjustly, whether under the

guise of immigration enforcement or everyday law enforcement.

"It's nice to have politicians, the president or even a judge bringing attention to a cause, but it's us, the people, who must organize, bring attention to what we want and don't want, and to what we'll tolerate and won't tolerate," Wilson said.

"You need to have some kind of grass-roots organizing to bring attention to what's happening," he said, suggesting voting, registering to vote and other approaches within the political system to "let the leadership know what we want."

"(U.S. President) Barack Obama can't do it as one man," he said. "I can't do it even as a judge; the masses have to go out and bring attention to it."

Wilson, the first African-American presiding judge in Arizona when he was named to the post in 2002, worked before law school at the Learning Tree, a Springfield, Mass., program that provides support to juvenile ex-offenders who are interested in attending college.

He later established the Roots Academy in Roxbury, Mass., where gang members and at-risk youths are taught about positive social thinking and social behavior. He has continued to be active inside and outside the courtroom in providing alternatives to crime and gang behavior.

He gave an example from his court of a young African immigrant who unwittingly ran afoul of his school's zero-tolerance policy by bringing his asthma inhaler to his small charter school without the proper paperwork. Having only been in the country a couple of months, his parents didn't understand the process or the implications of failing to follow it, Wilson said.

The boy was expelled from the school and transferred to public school, where he was teased, harassed and beaten up, the judge said. Eventually the boy defended himself, ending up getting arrested and sentenced to three months in jail. There, he was raped and contracted AIDS.

"In 2009, the boy died," Wilson said. "All this could have been prevented," if only more effort had been made by the local community to help the immigrant family with their cultural transition.

“As a community, we must rally to protect people,” he said.

In one of several workshops at the conference, participants focused on how their African religious and cultural traditions could be brought into play as they become involved in the Catholic Church in the United States.

One man, a Nigerian immigrant who lives in Tucson, noted that church in the United States “looks very different” from Africans’ home experiences.

“In Africa, the way you attend church is a kind of sanctity, an awareness that this is a place of God,” he said. “Here it seems as if God is a more casual thing. I visited a variety of churches to try to find that kind of atmosphere I feel when I go to church in Africa.”

Even at St. Cyril of Alexandria Church, which hosted the conference as the Tucson Diocese’s anchor parish for African immigrants, the diversity among the Africans in terms of language and cultural differences means a stretch to find commonality.

Ultimately, he said, he came to liken the experience of attending church in the United States to the commonality of soccer. He sometimes goes to Mass in Spanish, which he does not speak, but where the order of the Mass and all its elements are familiar.

“If you play soccer, whether the language being spoken is Spanish or something else,” he said, “you know what is going on.”