

Faith groups across the spectrum taking up call for immigration reform

WASHINGTON – Across the faith spectrum this year, from the Sojourners to the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptists, prayer, education and advocacy are being taken up for the cause of immigration reform.

Arizona's passage in April of a law making it a crime to be in the state without immigration documents has spurred a range of actions by churches, including some that decided to move their conventions out of the state and others that are holding weeks-long prayer vigils. Still others are steering clear of commenting on the law, but have stepped up their activities in support of national immigration reform legislation.

In early June, the superiors of each of the nine U.S. Jesuit conferences sent a letter to President Barack Obama and members of Congress pressing for immediate reform.

"With the new Arizona law, there is a real risk that life on our national borders will become subject to a patchwork of state responses," said Jesuit Father Thomas H. Smolich, president of the Jesuit Conference of the United States, in a statement accompanying the letter. "Congress is faced with both a constitutional and a moral imperative to act."

The letter lists many of the same key elements espoused by other supporters of comprehensive reform:

- A path to legalization for the estimated 12 million people in the country who lack legal immigration status. Most advocates say this path should include payment of any owed back taxes and a fine and waiting in line for permanent residency behind immigrants with legal status.
- A legal immigration structure that allows immigrants to fill gaps in the labor

market without taking jobs from U.S. citizens.

- A better system for family reunification to replace one that currently means most families have to wait many years to bring in spouses or children, leading many to resort to entering the country without permission.

The Jesuits' letter also listed the need for "due process and humane enforcement of our immigration laws," and "development assistance and fair competition with developing countries" among their priorities.

A week later, leaders of nine major conservative evangelical churches or institutions at a press conference in the Capitol made a similar call to action by Congress, with an added emphasis on tying such steps as legalization to prerequisites to control illegal traffic across the Mexican border.

Quoting Old and New Testament Scripture and noting that President George W. Bush and Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., along with the late Sen. Ted Kennedy, D-Mass., led the charge for comprehensive reform four years ago, speakers from Conservatives for Comprehensive Immigration Reform echoed many of the Jesuits' points.

"What do you do with the 12 million or more individuals living here in shadows?" asked Mat Staver, dean of Liberty University School of Law, founded by the late Rev. Jerry Falwell. "You combine Leviticus 19, to be compassionate to the alien in your midst, with Romans 13, the rule of law. You can't deport all of them. It's not practical, it's not moral, and I don't believe it's biblical either."

Catholic, Lutheran and other churches have long been at the forefront of both providing social and legal services to immigrants and working for reform of laws to make legal migration easier.

In the last few rounds with Congress in trying to get a comprehensive immigration reform bill passed, more faith groups have joined the effort, many following the lead of evangelicals such as the Rev. Samuel Rodriguez, who heads the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference.

At the evangelicals' press conference, Rev. Rodriguez said evangelicals are

increasingly united in support of immigration reform. The National Association of Evangelicals in 2009 issued a statement that combined scriptural calls to treat strangers well with “national realities” in urging an immigration policy that “is considerate of immigrants who are already here and who may arrive in the future” and that promotes national security and general welfare, he noted.

“I think we’re building a lot of support in the pew,” Rev. Rodriguez said. “The influence of talk radio hosts and others in the media who oppose immigration reform is diminishing in light of the evangelical leaders who have stood up on the issue.”

Meanwhile, the Interfaith Immigration Coalition has organized a national solidarity vigil and fast, running from June 6 to July 28, the date Arizona’s legislation is scheduled to take effect. The coalition’s members include Lutheran, Mennonite, Jewish, Islamic, Sikh and Unitarian groups as well as Franciscans, Jesuits, Sisters of Mercy, Pax Christi USA and Network, a Catholic social justice lobby.

A website, changetakesfaith.org, gives a state-by-state schedule for prayer and vigil activities led by faith communities. Each week, assigned states will have volunteers scheduled for constant prayer and at least one public prayer event, focused on standing “with our immigrant brothers and sisters and stand(ing) against those who seek to divide our communities and distract from the real solution to our broken immigration system: comprehensive immigration reform.”

Some churches are changing meeting plans. The board of trustees of the Unitarian Universalist Association voted in May to cancel plans to hold its 2012 general assembly in Phoenix as a sign of solidarity with the people likely to be targeted for enforcement of the new law. The board noted that cancelling arrangements might run the association as much as \$617,000, and that member congregations had offered to put up shares of the cost.

In explaining the board’s vote, a report on the association’s website said: “We concluded that a values-first decision would make meeting in a location where Unitarian Universalists would be potentially subject to hostile, dangerous, and undignified treatment intolerable.

“By the same token, our solidarity with those standing on the side of love within the

state requires that pulling the (general assembly) from Phoenix represents a deeper, not lesser, engagement with the vitally important witness against such hateful legislation,” it said.