

Vigils, Rallies Nationwide Focus on Immigrants, Immigration Reform

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www.catholicnews.com

February 4, 2009

WASHINGTON (CNS) -- Immigrant advocates from faith groups and Congress have been organizing two types of events to take place in dozens of cities around the country in coming weeks.

The Interfaith Immigration Coalition is providing how-to guides for organizing a prayer vigil or other event and gathering information about activities planned around the country as they are announced.

As of Feb. 4, Patty Kupfer, of the immigration reform advocacy organization America's Voice, said about 80 prayer vigils and other faith-based events already had been organized for Feb. 13-22.

The goals of all the events are to raise awareness about individuals whose lives are affected by problems with the U.S. immigration system and to build up support for comprehensive immigration reform.

Meanwhile, Rep. Luis Gutierrez, D-Ill., was spearheading a five-week national tour of rallies, intended to "document the harm caused to citizens across our nation in the absence of comprehensive immigration reform," as a press release from his office put it.

Information about some prayer events was posted on the site www.interfaithimmigration.org, including details of both small and large efforts and one intended to take place completely in the virtual world -- on Facebook, a social networking Internet site.

Gutierrez announced rallies in churches and public spaces starting Feb. 27 and running through April 4. Many, but not all, of the events were being planned by evangelical congregations.

Among cities and dates included in an initial list of events were: Providence, R.I., Feb. 27; Atlanta, Feb. 28; Albuquerque, N.M., March 1; Phoenix, March 8; several cities in Texas, two weeks in mid-March; Chicago, March 21; Milwaukee, March 22; three Florida cities at the end of March; and Philadelphia, April 4.

Gutierrez's announcement said the rallies are intended to support the "thousands of U.S. citizens whose families have been, or risk being, torn apart by our broken immigration system."

"Across America, parents and children, husbands and wives are being torn apart by a system that values quotas over family values and which undermines our economic security in a time of crisis," said Gutierrez in a statement.

The Interfaith Immigration Coalition events were being organized entirely at a local level and were expected to increase in number as word gets out about the effort, Kupfer told Catholic News Service.

More than two dozen religious organizations make up the coalition. Members include the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas; the national advocacy center of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd; Network, a Catholic social justice lobbying organization; and Jewish, Presbyterian, Episcopal, Mennonite, Unitarian, Lutheran and Methodist groups.

Events range from something as simple as an hour of prayer in the chapel of Mount St. Benedict Monastery in Erie, Pa., and as complex as a multifaith service with Catholic and Episcopal bishops and traditional Mexican dancers at a large Unitarian church in Rochester, N.Y.

Bill Mefford, of the United Methodist Board of Church and Society, said the groups holding prayer events were being asked to focus on three things: the protection of immigrants and their families; the empowerment of the faith community in support of immigrants; and moral courage for political leaders to do what they can to help immigrants.

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Benedictine Sister Marlene Bertke told CNS the hour of prayer planned for the chapel at Mount St. Benedict Feb. 18 was being promoted around Erie with fliers and e-mails. She said similar events in the past have drawn as few as 30 or as many as 120 people to the chapel.

Mercy Sister Janet Korn, who works with Catholic Charities in the Rochester Diocese, said the Feb. 16 service she was helping organize would include participation by Rochester Bishop Matthew H. Clark and Episcopal Bishop Prince Singh, himself an immigrant from India.

She said the service would focus on the call to be a welcoming community as rooted in various faith traditions.

Among the other events listed on the Interfaith Immigration Coalition Web site were:

-- A silent prayer walk through downtown Decorah, Iowa, Feb. 22, with a procession route between two Lutheran churches and a prayer vigil at Our Lady of Charity Church, next to Mercy Hospital in Miami, Feb. 13.

-- A "virtual" prayer vigil Feb. 16 being promoted through Facebook, and a discussion on immigration and a candlelight vigil in Virginia Feb. 13.

-- A Feb. 13-16 Ignatian teach-in in Washington, sponsored by the Ignatian Solidarity Network and focusing on human dignity and immigration.