

## **CHURCHES IN WA TO PROVIDE SANCTUARY TO ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS**

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May 10, 2007

Several Western Washington churches have announced plans to protect illegal immigrants from deportation by offering physical, emotional, financial and legal support as well as stepping up political pressure on the federal government to reform immigration laws.

None of the religious leaders participating in a news conference Wednesday at St. Mark's Episcopal Cathedral said they had offered a place to live yet to any immigrant families.

One immigrant, who is a member of one of the churches, spoke of his struggles.

Rene Martinez, of Auburn, told of his arrest in March at Emerald Downs racetrack. He said, through an interpreter, that he and his wife and two children were waiting to hear from immigration officials about whether they would be deported. Martinez moved to the United States from Hidalgo, Mexico, about 10 years ago.

"It's an experience I was not expecting to happen to me," Martinez said. "Right now I could be arrested again. It's not a clear process."

Martinez, whose 4-year-old son Rodrigo sat on his lap, said he doesn't understand why he would be arrested for working.

"I was treated as a criminal," he said.

Religious leaders and immigrant activists said they and members of their communities had decided to increase their advocacy on behalf of illegal immigrants from marches and letter-writing to more direct support because of the recent increase in legal action against families.

"For years, we've prayed, written letters and marched ... nothing has happened in response to our activities," said the Rev. Tony Haycock of St. Mary's Catholic Church in Seattle.

They spoke of American children being separated from their immigrant parents.

"Arrests by ICE (the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency) over the last few months ... seem by many of us designed to create a culture of fear,"

said Rev. Robert Taylor of St. Mark's. "We're talking about separation of families. That is not a family value that most of us want to be associated with."

He called on Congress and President Bush to "stop the foot dragging" on immigration reform.

Rabbi Jonathan Singer of Temple Beth Am in Seattle said his congregation is just waking up to the need to advocate for the welfare of illegal immigrants.

"Many of our members have been in denial that they are part of the problem," Singer said, pointing out that immigrants often care for Americans' elderly parents, work in the factories that create the goods they buy, and keep restaurants and hotels going.

The "New Sanctuary Movement" is modeled on a movement in the 1980s, when churches in Seattle and elsewhere harbored Central American refugees fleeing wars in their home countries. Similar kickoff events took place Wednesday in San Diego, New York, Chicago and Los Angeles. Organizers in Seattle said they were getting calls from churches from all over the state of Washington asking how they could get involved.

Yolanda Quiroga, of Lynnwood, who immigrated to the United States from Guadalajara, Mexico, 26 years ago and is now a U.S. citizen, came to the Seattle event because her husband works as an advocate for immigrants.

She cried when Martinez told his story because she said it made her picture his children being treated like criminals.

"I can't take that picture out of (my) mind," Quiroga said, adding it also makes her think of her own young grandson.

## Seattle Post-Intelligencer

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