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Iowa billboards show sisters' support of immigration reform

by Zoe Ryan

Immigration and the Church



Billboard photo/design by Pam Brookens

In preparation for the Iowa caucuses, 10 communities of religious sisters issued billboards Monday across Iowa with a Gospel message in addition to a statement calling on the president and Congress to make progress on comprehensive immigration reform.

The billboards read, "I was an immigrant and you welcomed me" with a strikethrough the phrase "a stranger" and signed "Jesus." The verse is a take on Matthew 25:35.

With these actions, the sisters hope to promote welcoming communities and let the public know where the sisters stand on this issue, Franciscan Sr. Patricia Farrell said. Farrell is the president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious and vice president of the Sisters of St. Francis in Dubuque, Iowa, one of the 10 congregations involved.

Most of the congregations, if not all, have corporate stances on comprehensive immigration reform, she said.

Billboards first appeared Monday, the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, in the Iowa cities of Quad Cities,

Des Moines, Dubuque, Cedar Rapids, Sioux City and Clinton.

The sisters held prayer services at the billboards and their headquarters Monday. About 100 people, including Farrell, attended Dubuque's prayer service.

In addition to the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Dec. 12 was also chosen to highlight the five-year anniversary of a series of immigration raids at Swift and Co. plants in six states, and to put comprehensive immigration reform in the minds of people before the Iowa caucuses at the end of December, Farrell said.

The U.S. bishops' conference has been active with immigration topics as well, calling for comprehensive immigration reform through campaigns such as Justice for Immigrants. On the same day the billboards from the sisters appeared, the 33 U.S. Hispanic and Latino Catholic bishops signed a pastoral letter to immigrants, expressing concern for them and solidarity, Catholic News Service reported. (Text of the letter can be found [here](#).)

Farrell said the sisters stand in solidarity and support the position of the bishops' conference.

When the rights of vulnerable people are abused, it is a short time before the rights of others are abused, Humility Sr. Johanna Rickl said.

In the statement addressed to President Barack Obama and Congress, the sisters call themselves "Immigrant Welcoming Communities" in contrast to "Secure Communities," the federal program that partners local governments with the federal government to share the fingerprints of immigrants in U.S. jails who could be deported under immigration law.

A great concern of the sisters is that the Secure Communities program has been implemented quietly, without much public attention, and that more people have been deported because of that than through raids, Farrell said.

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Secure Communities has proven to be too broad and the enforcement varies a great deal throughout the country, Rickl said. Local authorities should not be burdened with the federal government's responsibilities, she said.

According to the statement, "We understand that enforcement of law is part of any immigration policy. However, the present policy of involving state and local law enforcement agencies in the enforcement of federal immigration law, such as in the Secure Communities program, has resulted in abuses and the undermining of the trust between immigrant communities and the law enforcement agencies which is necessary to ensure public safety."

The sisters invite other organizations to join them in their call.

The congregations came together because of a few organizations, including Sisters United News (a group of religious congregation communication directors of the Upper Mississippi Valley) and an immigration task force among six of the congregations, Rickl said.

The communities are the Dominican Sisters of Sinsinawa, Wis.; Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Dubuque, Iowa; Sisters of the Humility of Mary in Davenport, Iowa; Sisters of the Presentation in Dubuque; Sisters of St. Francis in Clinton, Iowa; Sisters of St. Francis in Dubuque; Sisters of St.

Benedict in Rock Island, Ill.; Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration in La Crosse, Wis.; Sisters of the Visitation in Dubuque; and Sisters of Mercy in West Midwest Community in Omaha, Neb.

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