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Washington state leaders create wish list for comprehensive immigration reform

Dan Morris-Young | Aug. 26, 2013 Immigration and the Church

A central Washington state consortium of labor, business, religious and government leaders have made public a set of five principles they say should be the foundation for comprehensive United States immigration reform.

The precepts, announced at a press conference Saturday at Heritage University in Toppenish, Wash., endorse secure sovereign borders; underscore the human dignity of the undocumented; support the right "to find economic opportunities" in one's homeland but acknowledge a right to emigrate to secure a decent living; and declare "refugees and asylum seekers should be afforded protection."

Dialogue participants exchanged differing views and overcame "a highly politicized climate" to develop the shared ideals, said Yakima Bishop Joseph Tyson, who in large part chaired the nine-month effort leading to the shared statement.

Immigration issues are high profile and contentious in the Yakima and Spokane dioceses of eastern and central Washington. The area is home to the bulk of the state's more than $46 billion food and agriculture industry, much of which is dependent on seasonal labor predominately made up of both documented and undocumented Hispanic immigrants.

On any given Sunday, the majority of Catholics attend Mass in Spanish in the Yakima diocese, which encompasses the counties of Yakima, Benton, Chelan, Douglas, Grant, Kittitas and Klickitat. "There are about 80,000 registered Catholics, and at least as many who are not registered, a majority of whom are native Spanish speakers," a diocesan press statement said.

"When people think of Washington state," Tyson said, "they usually think of Boeing and Microsoft and Starbucks," but the farm and orchard industries are bedrock for the state's economy.

Tyson told *NCR* the project focused on bringing a "broad cross-section of stakeholders" to the table and expanding the immigration reform debate beyond political and economic terms to include "the moral perspective."

During the process leading to the announcement, Tyson said he was impressed with participants' "deep longing to treat immigrants well" and their desire to be "faithful to their professions and the law" while grappling with the complex immigration issues and often-conflicting regulations.

The other signatories are Toppenish Mayor Clara Jiménez; Heritage University President John Bassett; Cheryl and Ralph Broetje, owners of Broetje Orchards in Prescott, Wash.; and Tadeo Saenz-Thompson, CEO of Inspire Development Centers.

U.S. Sens. Maria Cantwell and Patty Murray of Washington as well as local state lawmakers have lauded the bridge-building and consensus-seeking work, a Yakima diocese spokesperson said.

Tyson said some participants in the conversation opted not to sign the principles even though they support them because of their roles in negotiations or the sensitivity of their positions.

Although not a signatory, state Rep. Bruce Chandler, R-Granger, was among the five people to introduce and speak to one of the principles at the press conference.

Chandler, ranking Republican on the state's Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee, said the disclosure of the set of principles "accurately accounts for the discomfort some face in discussing the immigration issue and yet shows the potential for a straight-forward, non-politicized discussion," the *Yakima Herald Republic* reported Sunday [1].

Asked what actual influence the principles' delineation might have, Tyson said, "I think a piece of the impact has already happened. We have folks talking to each other who had not on a regular basis had that opportunity, and so many people from such a wide spectrum -- that also has had an impact."

"We will carefully assess to see who touches them and who signs on and how they will be used," he added. "I think it might have even changed the tone of discussion, although tone is something hard to measure. But this will hopefully give people a different way of talking this out other than just the political. The political is important, but if that is the only way we talk about immigration, then our world is too small. We need a variety of ways to open this up."

The bishops of Washington state have written a pastoral letter on immigration reform that is in the translation stage and set to be released soon.

The dialogue began with participants reflecting on principles developed cooperatively by U.S. and Mexican bishops and promulgated in 2003, Tyson told *NCR*.

"Luckily," he said, "people found those neutral enough" to use as a starting point. And, he added, the final five conclusions clearly echo teaching from the joint 2003 bishops' statement.

"As a part of the process we have explored many secular, religious and legal doctrines to frame our thoughts," Holy Names Sr. Kathleen Ross, president emerita and professor of intercultural communications at Heritage University, said in a diocesan news release. "The group has been deliberate and thoughtful in its inclusion of all perspectives in arriving at the guiding principles."

Tyson lauded Ross for her role in organizing the immigration reform meetings.

Although not a religiously affiliated school, Heritage is an independent spinoff campus from Fort Wright College in Spokane, which closed in 1980.

In a letter to Tyson, U.S. Rep.Doc Hastings, a Democrat from Washington's 4th District, wrote: "I want to thank you for all your efforts to bring together community leaders and stakeholders to advance the dialogue in the important topic of immigration reform."

In an email, Cantwell wrote, "I commend the efforts of the diocese to foster a dialogue in the Yakima Valley and look forward to working with them and my colleagues in Congress to make comprehensive immigration reform a reality."

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