

## STATEMENT BY EPISCOPAL CHURCH ON FAITH & MIGRATION CONFERENCE

### Religious Leaders Gather to Deliver Message on Faith and Migration

On July 12<sup>th</sup>, over 150 religious leaders and representatives of a broad spectrum of faith traditions were joined by members of Congress to affirm their common commitment to comprehensive immigration reform. The conference underscored the strong feelings of religious leaders that, in spite of their different belief systems, they share a common moral perspective that immigrants coming to the US need to be treated fairly and compassionately. The timing of the conference coincided with the escalating national debate on immigration legislation now before Congress and was intended to counter efforts of some members of the House of Representatives to promote a less generous, enforcement only bill. House hearings are being held in various parts of the country, emphasizing border control and security as the exclusive premises upon which the US immigration system should be reformed. The Episcopal Church was among the religious bodies sponsoring the conference with the Church's Office of Government Relations and Episcopal Migration Ministries being directly involved in the planning and organization of the day's activities.

The Conference was launched with theological perspectives being offered by Rabbi Steve Gutow, Executive Director of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs; Sister Anne Curtis, councilor for the Sister's of Mercy; Dr. Richard Land, President of the Southern Baptist Convention; Dana Wilbanks, Professor Emeritus of Christian Ethics at the Iliff School of Theology in Denver, Colorado; and Bishop Allan Bjornberg, Bishop of the Rocky Mountain Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America.

Setting forth theological perspectives was noted by Senator Sam Brownback (R-KS) as an important move since, from his angle, there had not been "a theological perspective brought into the debate". The Kansas senator invited the group into the "big, noisy debate about immigration law and policy". The role of religious groups as important players in the debate was highlighted by other dignitaries who addressed the group. Senator John McCain (R-AZ), co-sponsor of S.2611 The Comprehensive Immigration Reform Act of 2006 (CIRA), admonished the religious communities for not being more visible actors in the debate and felt that their active engagement could be a crucial in keeping the momentum on track for a balanced piece of legislation. Another co-sponsor of CIRA, Senator Ted Kennedy (D-MA), was equally passionate while addressing conference participants in exhorting religious groups to challenge those who would make enforcement and punishment the sole focus of immigration legislation.

Among the theological views put forward, Dr. Land pointed out that Christians are “to act redemptively and to reach out to those who are hurting, whether they are legal or not”. Jim Wallis, the founder of Sojourners, called attention to the impact of Cardinal Roger Mahony’s statement instructing priests to break the law if the House bill criminalizing those who offered aid to illegal immigrants was enacted, describing the Catholic leader’s words as making “shock waves” and warning legislators that “when you attack immigrants you attack us in the religious community”. Rabbi Gutow invoked Jewish history, commenting that the plight of biblical Jews is “not much different from the poor, undocumented immigrant in our country today”. The rabbi spoke of the recurrent theme in Jewish history that the circumstances of Jews obliged them to identify with aliens who were uprooted and seeking safety and protection. Another Congressional guest, Representative Howard Berman (D-CA), cited his own experience as the son of a Jewish father who came from eastern Poland in the twenties, commenting that “it’s hard for me to turn my back on this”.

Compelling parts of the conference were testimonies provided by immigrants who could relate their experiences to the present debate. A twenty year old woman, Marie Gonzalez, from Costa Rica who was given a deferral from deportation to remain in the US to continue her education while she witnessed the deportation of her parents. Her parents had been US residents for 15 years and their hard work had allowed Marie to pursue her education. Marie, in commenting on the “monetary support, and most importantly, the emotional and material support given to me”, expressed gratitude for her good fortune but sadness that the parents who had made sacrifices for her future had been separated from her. Marie described the ordeal of her family as a “horrible nightmare”. She appealed to the audience “to do something for our students, who have only known the United States as our home and love this country and want a chance to give back. We are the future.”

As expressed by the Rev. Anthony Evans “it’s about the soul of the nation; laws must reflect our values”. A core message of all the speakers, both religious and political, was the importance of honoring our faith and historic traditions to treat strangers and natives alike and to extend hospitality to the stranger.

The afternoon of the conference was devoted to visiting Congresspersons and Congressional staff to convey the message that religious leaders and their communities represented constituencies who wanted comprehensive immigration reform to happen. In addition to visiting the offices of their representatives, some participants were able to meet with the House Majority and Minority Leadership, the Hispanic Caucus, and the Democratic Policy Committee. Several of the Episcopal Church delegation met with staff of Senator McCain, an Episcopalian, to express appreciation for his leadership on the immigration reform issue and to pledge on going support for the work being done by the Senator and his colleagues on both sides of the aisle to give the US a workable and just immigration system.

A corollary to the conference was the issuance of an updated interfaith statement on comprehensive immigration reform which bore the signatures of 250 denominational and religious spokespersons, among whom was The Episcopal Church. The statement called

for the regularization of the status for those in the US without status if they met certain criteria, reforms in our family based immigration system to significantly reduce the time that families in the US had to await reunification with close family members, the creation of legal avenues for workers and their families to enter the country to work while having their rights as workers fully protected, and implementing border protection policies consistent with humanitarian values, acknowledging that authorities must carry out the critical task of identifying and preventing the entry of those who would harm our nation. These are consistent with principles adopted by The Episcopal Church as expressed recently in a resolution of its 75<sup>th</sup> General Convention. Episcopal participants at the conference received copies of the resolution along with a statement from the Presiding Bishop endorsing comprehensive immigration reform to use on their Congressional visits.

When participants raised questions about the prospects of comprehensive immigration reform legislation passing, the response from the various political spokespersons was one of cautious optimism.

“There is no denying the challenge presented by the persistent negative messaging of those who oppose a comprehensive approach to immigration reform,” said Molly Keane, legislative analyst in the Office of Government Relations. “But religious leaders and laity should continue to aggressively advocate for comprehensive immigration reform.” Everyone said they believed that religious bodies, if they speak up, could affect the ongoing debate.

Among those attending the conference on behalf of the Episcopal Church were Canon Lydia Lopez and Maria (Magui) Lopez of the Diocese of Los Angeles, the Reverend Sara Beth Goodwin, Diocese of Washington, the Reverend Anna Lange-Soto, the Church of the Good Shepherd in Redwood City, CA (Diocese of San Francisco) and the Reverend Samuel Reddimalla, Diocese of New York.

Richard Parkins, EMM director, in assessing the conference, referred to it as “one of the most successful advocacy events in which we have been involved on the comprehensive immigration reform issue. The compelling statements of representatives of various religions combined with the moving and really informative presentations by notable members of Congress equipped the participants to step up their advocacy on behalf of comprehensive immigration reform with the hope that their involvement could make a difference”.