

Hundreds turn out to support immigrants on inauguration week

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By Christina Gray



Two nights before the inauguration of a president that made the swift deportation of undocumented immigrants a campaign promise, hundreds of people met at the St. Raphael School gym in San Rafael on Jan. 18 to pray and prepare together for an uncertain future.

The bilingual public forum was coordinated by the Marin Organizing Committee, a nonpartisan community organization made up of churches, synagogues and nonprofit organizations in Marin County that take collective action on issues of the common good. St. Raphael and St. Anselm parishes are two of MOC's 16 members.

The gathering was a mix of mostly Hispanic families, many toting sleeping babies and toddlers, members of Marin faith communities, public officials and other concerned citizens who helped prompt the organization of the event.

Over the course of the 90-minute agenda MOC members and guests shared spiritual reflections, personal stories and practical information with immigrant families in Marin. The latest U.S. Census Bureau figures report that 30 percent of the population of San Rafael, the most populous city in Marin County, is Hispanic.

Deacon Bernie O'Halloran of St. Anselm Parish led the assembly in a prayer for solidarity. "Let us be our brothers' and sisters' keepers, to listen deeply to the stories here tonight and to collaborate with one another and our elected public officials as we go forth."

MOC co-chairman Rev. Scott Quinn of the Marin Interfaith Council addressed the fear etched into the faces of the crowd.

"We don't know what the new president will do, but we do know that immigrant families in Marin face

many challenges every single day,” said Quinn. “If you want to support immigrants but don’t know how to do so, start tonight by listening.”

Cristina Garcia, a local parent, said the fear and stress in the immigrant community is real, “but not new.”

“We don’t know exactly what the president will do about us, but our community has housing problems too,” said Garcia.

Immigrant families are already stressed to the point of breaking, she said, trying to live in a county where more than 50 percent of their income goes toward rent, and where rent increases and evictions are arbitrary and unpredictable.

Many parents work two or three jobs to make the rent in apartment units with nonfunctioning water, heat or cooking appliances, she said, and immigrants often don’t know their rights.

“I started thinking, what would be more difficult, having no home or to be deported,” she said.

The meeting was in parts, a disaster preparedness session. Rev. Janet Reynolds, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of San Rafael, introduced San Rafael Police Chief Diana Bishop in an effort to assuage fears and increase trust between officers and immigrants in the community.

“Our immigrant neighbors have real fears of police enforcement, so tonight we are taking real steps to reduce those fears,” said Reynolds, who asked Bishop to answer questions on the minds of many in the room: how to avoid arrest.

An MOC Immigration Update handout available in Spanish offered detailed suggestions for what to do and how to act if law enforcement stops you. It included six bullet points under the heading: Know Your Rights.

Bishop assured the audience that “we are local law enforcement, not federal immigration.”

She said it was important to carry good identification, a driver’s license or a consular card with a picture. “We just want to know who we are talking with,” she said. “Give the officers what they need and let them do their job.”

Bishop agreed to the MOC’s request to a series of meetings between the police and immigrant families in coming months.

The MOC co-chair linked the housing crisis to the fears in the immigrant community.

“If we make renting in Marin County more stable, families will have less stress. Families with less stress will have fewer interactions with law enforcement,” said Quinn. “2017 will be unpredictable,” he said. “Now is the time to find leaders, train them and build relationships with other institutions.”

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