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Central Texas religious leaders: Immigration change must be just, humane

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Alberto Martinez

Central Texas religious leaders announced a campaign for “compassionate immigration reform” during a prayer service and press conference Tuesday at St. Ignatius Martyr Catholic Church in Austin. Pictured are Austin Catholic diocese Bishop Joe S. Vásquez, third from left, and Rabbi Alan Freedman of Temple Beth Shalom, seated next to Vásquez.

By Juan Castillo - American-Statesman Staff

With the U.S. Senate debate over immigration reform in its second week, Central Texas religious leaders pressed Tuesday for reforms centered on keeping families together and allowing unauthorized immigrants to earn legal residency with a path to citizenship.

In a lengthy statement, about two dozen leaders from various denominations said such principles were key to what they called just and humane immigration reforms, but conceded that not all Americans agree.

“We also hear the voices that fear the migrant. We understand the fears, but we believe that the treatment of the immigrant is a core religious value and to welcome the stranger is to welcome a child of God,” their statement said. It was authored by Bishop Joe Vásquez of the Catholic Diocese of Austin, Bishop James Dorff of the Southwest Texas Conference of the United Methodist Church, Bishop Ray Tiemann of the Southwestern Texas Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and a number of Austin-area pastors and rabbis.

Leaders presented the statement as they began a new campaign for immigration reform with a brief prayer service attended by about 100 people at St. Ignatius Martyr Catholic Church in Austin. They called on their congregations to contact their representatives in Washington and to urge humane reforms. Austin Interfaith organized Tuesday’s event.

The Rev. Vásquez said religious leaders were “united in one voice, invoking God to move the minds and hearts of our country’s legislators ... to bring about a just change in our immigration laws, which are broken.”

The interfaith statement outlines more than half a dozen principles for reforms, including protections for workers, reforming detention policies and expanding legal avenues for workers who want to come to the United States.

Allowing people already in the country illegally the opportunity to earn citizenship has proved perhaps the most imposing obstacle to previous attempts to overhaul the nation’s immigration policies, efforts going back more than a decade. Opponents call such a plan amnesty.

Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas, has offered an amendment to a Senate bill that would strengthen border security before allowing unauthorized immigrants to start on a path to citizenship. Supporters say Cornyn’s plan would make the Senate bill more palatable to Republicans, but Democrats and immigration reform proponents say the plan is meant to scuttle the bill.

Central Texas religious leaders said Tuesday they could not support a bill without a provision for an opportunity to earn citizenship. The Rev. Joseph Moore, pastor of Central Presbyterian Church in Austin, said such a proposal would be tantamount to “a faith community deal-breaker.”

“As faith leaders, we are united in a strong stance that that is antithetical to the core tenets of our different faiths, and that we can’t advocate for a system in which a permanent underclass is just perpetuated,” Moore said.

Rabbi Alan Freedman of Temple Beth Shalom in Austin said it was appropriate to address immigration reform in a religious setting.

“Even though it’s a political issue, religion stands to some extent in contrast to the politics of it, saying you need more than just political outcomes, you need principled political outcomes,” Freedman said.