

Catholic Sentinel

Immigrant leaders being trained

With a Catholic grant, they aim first to build relationships and listen to families to learn pressures

[Ed Langlois](#), Of the Catholic Sentinel

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HILLSBORO — Portland-area community organizers are attempting to harness the power of Catholic parishes. The goal is to prepare leaders from and for the region's Hispanic immigrant community.

Backed by funds from the national Catholic Campaign for Human Development, more than 70 people attended a training April 6-7 at Brown Middle School here. The focus of their future action will be

Washington County, where plans call for advocacy for low-income immigrants. Hopes include job training, classes in English, motorist privileges, housing aid, better communication with school leaders, and ways to soften fears over deportation.

Catholic funding for the Recognizing the Stranger project went to **Metropolitan Alliance for Common Good**, a coalition of Portland-area faith groups, unions and helping agencies. With MACG arranging plans, four trainers from dioceses of the Southwest came to help.

Recognizing the Stranger began last year in seven Southwest dioceses, training more than 600 immigrant advocates. This year it expanded into 12 more dioceses, including western Oregon.

“Considering Archbishop [Alexander] Sample’s expressed intent for better services to Hispanic Catholics, this is an amazing gift to help achieve this,” said Matt Cato, director of the Office of Life, Justice and Peace for the archdiocese.



Ana Chavarin, a community organizer from Tucson, Arizona, leads a training session focused on developing Hispanic leadership at Catholic parishes. (Courtesy Metropolitan Alliance for Common Good)

The project's first step is to support immigrant advocates as they try to develop relationships in their own parishes. Then the new leaders will build bridges to other parishes.

Ralph McCloud, director of the national Catholic Campaign for Human Development, said the end game is to “create local capacity and alliances to help immigrants engage in public life and to offer a compassionate and constructive response to the fractured immigration system.”

The leaders hope to promote church teaching and solidarity between low-income immigrants and other parishioners. The training is built around an understanding of the sacramental life of the parish, namely Eucharist and baptism.

The Archdiocese of Portland approved the training and organizers have worked to win the support of pastors.

Training sessions included a look at the idea of the Body of Christ, lessons on collective leadership from the Book of Exodus and the baptismal identities of priest, prophet and king. Parish leadership teams are encouraged to study Scripture and church teaching. Other courses identified the pressures on families and offered strategies for building parish teams and holding house meetings to hear from families.

In the coming months, MACG leaders will work with parish leaders and pastors to create local ways to reinvigorate parish life, starting with sessions in which leaders listen to parishioners. Information from listening will help parish leaders set priorities.

“Organizing begins with listening and lifting up family stories,” said Mary Nemmers, lead organizer for MACG and a member of St. Andrew Parish in Northeast Portland.

Leaders-in-training came from St. Matthew Parish in Hillsboro, St. Elizabeth Ann Seton in Aloha, St. Alexander in Cornelius, St. Anthony in Forest Grove, St. Anthony in Tigard, plus Holy Redeemer, St. Andrew and St. Charles in Portland.

Father Scott Baier, parochial vicar of St. Anthony Parish in Tigard, presided at a Mass in Spanish to conclude the training.

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