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## Clergy form Justice for Immigrants coalition

*By Leslie Boyd*

Doug Wingeier, a retired theology professor and minister, left after church services last Sunday morning to join the immigration reform rally in front of City County Plaza.

Both activities are part of his faith, he says.

"Actually, it's broader than my faith, but my faith is at the heart of it," he said. "It comes from Jesus' teaching and his concern for the needs of all, especially the poor and the marginalized. If you recall, in Matthew, Jesus said, 'Inasmuch you do unto the least of these you do also unto me.'"

Wingeier is one of 300 clergy from many different faiths who have signed onto the N.C. Religious Coalition for Justice for Immigrants. The new organization supports the reform of the United States immigration system, treating immigrants with respect, and engaging one another in positive dialogue across the political spectrum.

On a recent trip to El Salvador, Wingeier said, he visited a small village atop a mountain and saw almost no men of working age. All had gone to the United States to send money home to support their families.

"These people are victims of our flawed trade policies," he said.

Chris Liu Beers of the N.C. Council of Churches said his organization has functioned as a coordinator of this effort.

"There's a growing concern among people of all faiths about the way people are being treated and the increasingly mean-spirited rhetoric," Beers said. "We're using our religious traditions to counter that rhetoric."

Beers said he has seen a surge in the number of people of faith becoming active in the movement to reform immigration laws.

The Coalition hasn't made plans for rallies or other activities, Beers said, but most of the people and organizations that have signed on have organized or attended their own events.

Gary Prichard, a retired minister in the Christian Church/Disciples of Christ, now attends the Unity Center in Mills River. He is active in the immigration-reform movement because he sees it as a matter of justice.

"Jesus talks about the fate of people who do not welcome the stranger and it is not good," Prichard said. "In fact, among all the world's major faiths, it is a central teaching."

Prichard said he read recently that the sheriff of Cook County, Ill., is refusing to enforce foreclosures because the law is unjust.

"Why can't local law enforcement do the same about unjust immigration laws?" he said. "I would encourage them to look at these laws and think about whether they are just."

Wingeier and his wife, Carol, have sponsored seven immigrants from El Salvador and Honduras. Their son, Phillip, was an immigration attorney near the Mexican border.

“There really isn't a legal path for people to get here anymore,” Wingeier said. “It's expensive and there are many, many barriers.”

The vilification of immigrants runs in cycles and usually reaches a peak in tough economic times, Wingeier said.

“I think the cycle will turn again, but I think we need to see a change in the laws,” he said.

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