



Churches are sought to support immigrants

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DURHAM -- Organizers traveled to Duke University on Sunday to try to drum up more backing from churches to support immigrants' rights.

"Immigration policy has been a secular debate, and churches have not often weighed in," said Chris Beers, an associate of the N.C. Council of Churches. "It's the kind of conversation that also needs to be a religious conversation."

Beers and El Pueblo Inc. Advocacy Director Irene Godinez were the featured speakers in a morning program at Duke's divinity school that drew an audience of about a dozen.

The event occurred amid the controversy over Hispanic immigration fueled by disagreements about the admissibility of the children of illegal immigrants to state community colleges, the arrests of illegal immigrants by the Alamance County Sheriff's Office, and the anti-Hispanic comments Johnston County Sheriff Steve Bizzell made earlier this month to a Raleigh newspaper.

Godinez alluded in her presentation to most of those issues. She criticized a former employer, Democratic Party gubernatorial candidate and Lt. Gov. Beverly Perdue, for opposing community college admissions.

Perdue's stance, Godinez said, runs counter to her place "on a ticket of education for all."

Godinez also urged people to keep an eye on local law enforcement agencies such as Durham's that sign deals with federal authorities allowing them to enforce immigration laws.

The Durham Police Department joined that program in February.

So far, Police Chief Jose Lopez "has been pretty transparent with us, and they've only trained one officer" to work on immigration enforcement, Godinez said.

"But still, when ... the community realized there was this program in place, they were hesitant and are still suspicious and will think twice [about talking to police] if they're victims or witnesses to a crime," she said.

A similar agreement enabled the Alamance County crackdown spearheaded by that county's sheriff, Terry Johnson, she said.

Officials there have had Hispanics deported over misdemeanors, not the violent felonies even El Pueblo agrees merit speedy removal from the country, she said.

Beers said the theological rationale for churches to intervene is the idea of "hospitality" embedded in the Bible. He noted that Jesus was at different points in his life a homeless infant, a child refugee, an adult with no place to lay his head and a despised convict.

The Council of Churches has been trying to get ministers and other congregation leaders to sign a formal statement

calling for "justice for immigrants." It had at last count 822 signatures, mostly from liberal congregations such as Binkley Baptist Church in Chapel Hill and the Watts Street Baptist Church in Durham.

Few if any conservative or black congregations from the area appear on the list.

Beers and Godinez agreed that federal immigration policy needs a top-to-bottom reform. But they didn't say anything about what that should entail, either in terms of the numbers or criteria that should govern admissions.

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