



Immigration reform backers meet in Riverside

TEXT SIZE

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RIVERSIDE - More than 40 people gathered at St. Peter's Church in Riverside on Monday night to support nationwide immigration reform.

The New Jersey Immigration Policy Network hosted the program with leaders from several faith-based organizations from across the state.

Charles "Shai" Goldstein, executive director of the Immigration Policy Network, said the gathering reinforced the need for fair, comprehensive immigration reform.

"We need to get rid of the blinders and face reality," Goldstein said. "The question is, are we progressing or regressing? We need to progress. We need to move forward. The only way we can move forward is by having no xenophobia, no bigotry and doing what makes the most sense."

The group read a series of quotations from civil rights activists throughout history, including excerpts from Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech. After the readings, the group stood and held hands while singing "We Shall Overcome."

Goldstein said he's been sponsoring interfaith gatherings like the one Monday night for 10 years.

"We've been utilizing this as an instrument to bring communities together when there's been damage, and there has been damage," Goldstein said. "The damage's been caused by failure to enact a federal immigration policy."

The event took place four days after gatherings were held in Riverside, Cinnaminson and Willingboro to listen to activists speak about their plans to lobby for a national immigration reform bill next year.

Last week, Goldstein called Riverside a "national example" because of the small stores and businesses that have closed there in the three years since the local governing body passed a law penalizing businesses and landlords that hired or rented to illegal immigrants.

However, the 2006 ordinance never was enforced and was repealed in 2007 after a federal judge struck down a similar law in Hazleton, Pa.

Goldstein and other activists said the ordinance scared away a large portion of Riverside's thriving population of Brazilians and Portuguese even though it was repealed.

The Rev. Angelo Amaral of St. Peter's, which is part of Jesus the Good Shepherd Catholic Parish, said he thinks immigration reform would help bring people back to Riverside.

"We're trying to bring more life to Riverside," Amaral said. "(Immigrants) have human rights. My position is to welcome the immigrants and to support them."

Marlene Lao-Collins, director for social concerns for the New Jersey Catholic Conference, said immigrants have made important contributions to the community.

"We want to be together with them in solidarity and express to them how grateful we are for their contributions to this community and to New Jersey," Lao-Collins said. "The lack of reform has had a negative impact on a local level. That's caused a lot of consternation among folks and they sometimes feel fearful and they aren't able to live within the fullness of a community."

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