

GROUNDWORK FOR SOLIDARITY ON IMMIGRATION

PROJECT REPORT

September 2017

From The Missions Office
submitted by
Joe Hastings, Field Staff

A collaborative project of
the Missions Office, the Office for Hispanic Ministry,
and the Immigrant and Refugee Ministry of the
Archdiocese of Seattle

with support from

the Department of Justice, Peace, and Human Development of the
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

The Groundwork for Solidarity on Immigration Project listened to Hispanic Catholics in the Archdiocese of Seattle talk about their experience and needs in the current immigration crisis, with the intent of opening up more communication with other Catholic ministries. This report summarizes what was said and heard in this project.

Project Purpose and Goals:

The project was conceived with two goals. The first was to increase dialogue in the Archdiocese between Hispanic Catholic communities and other groups or parishes that want to help, support, or be in solidarity with vulnerable undocumented immigrants and their families. The second was to gather experiences and comments which can provide context for the Archdiocesan Immigrant and Refugee Ministry to plan its work for the year ahead in collaboration with the Office for Hispanic Ministry (through their representative) and the Missions Office, with attention to increasing collaboration in pastoral action and solidarity for advocacy for immigration reform.

This project was not a social science study of Hispanic Catholic experience. It sought simply a broad, accurate, first-hand impression of what Hispanic Catholics are experiencing in Western Washington since January with respect to immigration. The project was not an assessment nor an evaluation of parish activities to serve immigrants; its aim was to find out the participants' experiences in their local communities, including parishes.

The Project Genesis and Activity:

In May staff from the Missions Office (JL Drouhard, Kelly Hickman and Joe Hastings), the Multicultural Youth and Young Adult Ministry (Edwin Ferrera, representing the Office for Hispanic Ministry), and the Immigrant and Refugee Ministry (Joe Cotton) met to discuss submitting an application to the Hispanic Ministry and Social Justice Small Grants Program of the USCCB Department of Justice, Peace, and Human Development. The program was offering small grants to increase collaboration between diocesan staff working on social justice and staff in Hispanic ministry. Among several ideas discussed, we decided to write a proposal for the project summarized in this report. The Missions Office (Catholic Campaign for Human Development) and the Immigrant and Refugee Ministry agreed to contribute matching funds to provide adequate budget for the project. All three offices agreed to co-sponsor the project, and the work was to be carried out by the Missions Office Field Staff, Joe Hastings. A grant application was submitted to USCCB – JPHD and approved in late May, and project activity began in June.

The project involved gathering focus groups and holding interviews with Hispanic Catholics in twelve parishes and programs in the Archdiocese, identified by the

Missions Office and Hispanic Ministry staff together. All three sponsoring offices contributed names of contacts in Hispanic communities, and the field staff drew heavily on contacts identified in the recent Missions Office effort to raise Hispanic participation in CRS Rice Bowl. We sought to include a variety of parish communities - rural, urban, small and large. The project did not visit parishes or sites in King County. We made this decision based on the assumptions that within King County (1) diocesan staff were more familiar with the situation of Hispanic immigrants, (2) services and networks for immigrants are most available compared with the remainder of the Archdiocese, and (3) information about vulnerable, undocumented Hispanic immigrants would be available from Catholic Community Services.

The parishes and programs, along with the date of visit, are:

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| 1. St. Rose of Viterbo Parish, Longview | June 9, 2017 |
| 2. St. John the Evangelist Parish, Vancouver | June 9 |
| 3. St. Phillip Parish, Woodland | June 11 |
| 4. Sacred Heart Parish, Tacoma | June 18 |
| 5. St. Mary Parish, Aberdeen | June 18 |
| 6. Prince of Peace Mission, Belfair | June 20 |
| 7. St. Olaf Parish, Poulsbo | June 20 |
| 8. Sacred Heart Parish, Lacey | June 25 |
| 9. Church of the Assumption, Bellingham | July 2 |
| 10. Tri-Parish Food Bank, Burlington | July 5 |
| 11. St. Mary-of-the-Valley Parish, Monroe | July 7 |
| 12. CCS Farmworker Center, Mt. Vernon | July 11 |

For each site, we contacted parish staff or leaders in Hispanic ministry and asked them to convene a small group of five or six people for an informal conversation (in Spanish) about how people are living through the current immigration crisis. Where our contact in the parish was *not* a parish staff person, the pastor was contacted for his approval and inclusion. All of the contact persons were helpful in setting up focus groups or interviews, and many participated themselves. All acknowledged the importance of the Hispanic people they served speaking about their experience, and all expressed great appreciation that the project was happening.

Focus groups were as small as three and as large as twelve participants, and sometimes included parish staff; they usually lasted an hour. Some sites arranged a series of individual interviews, and these usually lasted 20 minutes each. Notes were taken, but the sessions were not recorded, and participants were asked only to introduce themselves by first name.

The focus group conversations were guided by four key questions:

1. How are you and your community experiencing the current immigration crisis?
2. What is the response in your parish and in the local area?
3. How can other Catholic parishes help, support, or stand in solidarity with you and your community?
4. What do you recommend as the next step toward building solidarity for immigrant justice?

From the first focus group onward, two additional questions were added:

5. Have you or your family members experienced racism since January?
6. Have any homilies in your parish addressed the immigration situation?

What was said...

This project was not guided by social science or a search for “objective data”. Rather, the purpose was pastoral listening to capture the people’s experience. This project was the first step in the process leading to better theological reflection, social analysis, and pastoral planning for this situation.

The responses reported below are aggregated into categories, and are not separated out by location (with a few exceptions). There was high consistency of what participants spoke about across the twelve locations. Words of anonymous participants are in italics.

Current experience

Nearly everyone I spoke with reported some **fear, uncertainty, and vulnerability**. Some felt afraid of being detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) or of family members being detained, usually based on knowing someone else recently apprehended, detained, or deported, and on what they were hearing in the media. Some felt uncertainty about their future, living in “mixed families”, where some members have legal status and some do not. Some felt vulnerable to profiling and harassment, either for themselves or their children. Some felt a deep uncertainty about pending asylum petitions, removal (deportation) orders, and the future of family members in the Northwest Detention Center in Tacoma. They hope for the best but fear the worst. The backdrop for all this is the recent changes in federal immigration policy, ICE enforcement practice, and racial intolerance, all of which affect their lives.

Those words – **fear, uncertainty, and vulnerability** – were used repeatedly to describe what is going on in themselves, their families, and their communities. Against this backdrop, participants showed tremendous resilience, openness, and appreciation. They were resilient in enduring in their communities, continuing to work, send their children to school, support extended family, and participate in the life of their parishes.

They were very open, generously sharing their experience with a white stranger, whose only introduction came by word of mouth. And they all appreciated that someone from the church had come to listen to their concerns, their experiences – often painful and difficult – and their suggestions for next steps.

The fear and uncertainty were their worst in February, in the weeks following President Trump's executive order on new ICE priorities. Rumors of ICE raids and checkpoints spread; many people reported that they or a family member missed days of work in late January or February because they feared being picked up by ICE at their place of work or in their commute. The fear has attenuated somewhat, but confusion continues. Attendance at English classes have dropped. Many people no longer visit family or friends in the Northwest Detention Center for fear of being picked up there.

In some areas, particularly the Skagit Valley, participants described ICE raids and arrests happening at their homes, witnessing arrests next door, or reported people – sometimes family members – being picked up by ICE on their way to work early in the morning.

"We are in limbo. We live in uncertainty, so we're staying quiet, at home, hiding."

"We're staying home a lot. When we go out, we don't know what's going to happen."

A few people reported neighbors returning to family in Mexico or Guatemala, but quickly added that their own family is staying at their current home.

"What can we do except ride it out? This is our home. My kids were born here."

When asked about racist words or gestures, everyone shared some recent experience of this. Many were quick to say that though racism has always existed, since January racist words and gestures are more frequent and open – in restaurants, stores, and schools. Almost all participants reported that their children have received racist comments from other students in school (from primary through high school) or discriminatory treatment from teachers.

"There are other undocumented minorities in Western Washington, but we're the ones getting targeted, because of our skin color, because we're poor! We're getting attacked and arrested. "

"One teacher asked my daughter, 'Is your family going back to Mexico?' That scared her."

“Other students ask my son if he’s illegal, and warn him that the police are going to arrest him after school. I tell him to turn around and walk away and silently say the Our Father.”

Some people have found some support in their parish, and in some areas, people reported the activities that their parishes have done in response to this crisis: help with legal paperwork or English tutoring. Some pastors have privately sought to reassure parishioners who are scared. Participants in some places reported that their parish had hosted or co-hosted a forum with local police and sheriff, who assured parishioners that they were not collaborating with ICE. These forums also educated people to identify local law enforcement by their uniform or by name. Some forums also included education about rights and warrants.

What is needed?

Every focus group and interview concluded by asking participants what they needed to get through this time. They were told that there are parishes and Catholic groups that want to help. What would they ask them to do? Beyond the first item, legal aid, the subsequent needs reported are not listed in any order.

Legal Aid

At every visit, in every focus group or interview, participants expressed the urgent need for legal help. This need was repeated everywhere, without prompting, and by almost every participant. Immigration lawyers are expensive and hard to find, but without a lawyer, an immigrant without documents who is detained by ICE is vulnerable to abuse in detention, neglect in the courts, and denial of their rights.

No one was aware of any nonprofit legal aid agencies outside of King, Snohomish and Kitsap counties. Those who knew of existing immigration legal aid agencies were well aware that they are overloaded with clients and inundated with requests for help. Outside those counties and Clark County (where some avail themselves of immigration assistance in Portland), options are few. Those seeking an immigration attorney must rely on word of mouth, which isn’t always reliable. Many people related stories of paying thousands of dollars to attorneys with no advance in their petitions for legal status. The most fortunate were those whose employers connected them with an attorney.

Some were aware of services of Catholic Immigration Legal Services of CCSWW and equally aware of the slim chances of getting representation from their inundated attorneys. Most were not even aware this service exists, and so asked why there wasn’t a Catholic legal aid agency in the archdiocese, where the Catholic name would convey trust and reliability. If an immigration attorney from the church wasn’t possible, they

asked at least for a list of recommended, trustworthy private immigration attorneys, to help them avoid paying money only to discover an attorney was not helping them. In rural areas this absence of legal aid is more acute, and families report needing to take days off from work just to see their immigration attorney in Seattle or Tacoma.

Together with legal help, some people suggested an emergency fund to help families whose members are detained at the Northwest Detention Center, particularly when wage-earners are detained, and the family loses its income. A small fund might help to pay for phone communication with detainees or for travel to Tacoma for family visits.

“We don’t need paralegals or assistants to help us fill out forms. That helped in the past, but the risks are higher now. We’re in a crisis, and we need good lawyers who can represent us in court.”

“We need at least a list of lawyers we can trust.”

“When I was detained by ICE, I got ONE phone call that lasted ONE minute. I called my daughter and told her to get an attorney as soon as she could. But when I hung up, I asked myself, ‘where is she going to find an attorney who can take my case, much less one we can afford?’”

Emergency Family Plans and Immigrant Rights

Another need expressed was information about immigrant rights and emergency family plans. “Know Your Rights” workshops have been plentiful in King, Pierce, Kitsap, and Snohomish Counties, but in rural areas almost no one reported awareness that these workshops had ever been offered. Two parishes had hosted Know Your Rights presentations; most participants reported attending or hearing about them though One America or at the local public school or community college. Participants who had attended and parishes that had hosted such workshops acknowledged that the participation had been low, either because of fear, misperceptions or poor outreach. They also affirmed that the need for information about rights was still real and that everyone needed to be prepared for an encounter with ICE.

Most participants had not heard of a “Family Emergency Plan”. At only two locations did participants report workshops or clinics on Family Emergency Plans in their area. Other participants shared that they are talking with other adults in the household about what they will do “just in case”, most were not aware of a legal document to record these plans.

“Single mothers are the most vulnerable people in this whole situation! Some have no family in the US or anywhere in the state. We need to reach out to them and help them prepare for an emergency.”

“Making that kind of plan on paper and then sharing it publicly is a bit strange for our culture. That’s the kind of thing we do in the extended family.”

Mental Health Services for Children.

In half of the sites visited, participants voiced a need for counseling for their children, especially those who had witnessed family members being arrested and detained, or youth who have been apprehended and detained themselves, and for the kids who have been racially harassed at school. Parents reported that their children are scared to talk about what happened. If their children were harassed at school, they do not trust the school counselor. Few other options exist. One mother acknowledged that in her culture, taking one’s child to speak with a counselor isn’t common, but she said, neither is it common to see the authorities take away your father, knowing you may never see him again.

“Even talking about an emergency plan with our children is traumatic for them.”

“How do I assure my kids that everything is OK, and at the same time sit down with them and explain a plan of what to do if I get arrested by ICE? That’s their worst fear!

“My 16-year old son, who was born here in the US, was apprehended by ICE and held for two nights and threatened with being sent to the ICE detention center. Months after he was released, he recognized the ICE officer at the local YMCA. The ICE officer recognized him and asked, ‘Are you still here?’ My son will not talk about it – any of it. He’s ashamed and angry. Who’s going to help him?”

Addressing Racism and Nationalism among White Catholics

The Hispanic respondents in this project all reported that they or their children have suffered from racist or nationalistic actions and words in their local communities, (though they did not report such experiences in their parishes). Hispanics have experienced racism and discrimination in the United States for years, but at every site people reported that these incidents have increased noticeably since January. Many asked for help from the Church in addressing racism among their fellow Catholics who are white. This was not to say that racism or nationalism among white Catholics in America is distinct from or worse than racism and nationalism among other white Americans, but our focus group conversations asked what *Catholic churches* can do to

help. In response, participants in more than half the communities asked that the Church help white people to face and overcome racism and nationalism.

“We and our kids deal with racism all the time – it’s been a reality for years! We don’t need a workshop on racism. The Anglos need a workshop on racism.”

“We are not getting racist attitudes in the parish, but the parish is full of leaders in the Anglo community, so why can’t they help us address racism in the wider community?”

*“The relations between the Hispanic community and the Anglo community in our parish are good; there are no problems. But it is definitely **two** communities. The pastor never tells the Anglo community that our problems are their problems too.”*

More visible solidarity in the Catholic Church in Western Washington.

Though no one used the word “solidarity”, this request surfaced in all the listening groups, in many ways. The participants attended church regularly, many were active in their parish. They spoke of supportive services in some parishes, and words of encouragement from some parish staff members, and yet all asked why they haven’t seen a more visible, official, public witness of their local Catholic Church in support of undocumented and vulnerable immigrants since January.

Many participants expressed appreciation that through this project someone from the Church – the Archdiocese – was listening to their experiences and asking them what they needed. Each listening group began with mention of the recently-created Immigrant and Refugee Ministry, and only two people (a pastor and a parish staff person) acknowledged awareness that such a ministry existed. A few mentioned words of support from their pastor or a parish staff in personal conversations, which they greatly appreciated. But increased detention and deportation have meant that vulnerable immigration is not only personal; it is a crisis for a large percentage of the Catholic population.

In only two listening groups did participants report hearing any mention of the immigration crisis, of their fears, vulnerability, from the pulpit. Most participants admitted that they had never expected a homily to address their situation regarding immigration status, though it causes them and their families fear, anxiety, and stress. This means that these Catholics, attending mass *in Spanish*, have not heard a homily about an issue which deeply affects their lives, one about which the USCCB issued a major pastoral letter, and one on which the bishops’ conference and Pope Francis have addressed repeatedly as a central concern of the Catholic Church in the last year.

According to the participants in this study, these statements are having little or no effect on preaching in the parishes.

In every group, participants echoed Pope Francis' insistent call for local churches to stand in solidarity with migrants.

"We need new language: It's not "these vulnerable people" or "those who are undocumented." This is us. Undocumented immigrants are our brothers and sisters in the Catholic family."

"We need to hear over and over that this church is our home, no matter what legal status we have, that we're always safe here and we're always welcome here."

"We want to see the Archbishop and the bishop out there, on the street, publicly supporting us! We want a public procession through the streets to the ICE office or the ICE detention center!"

"When my father was picked up and sent to the Northwest Detention Center, everyone knew, but no one from the parish called me – only the food bank director. My aunt attends the evangelical church, and they called to ask us if we needed help."

"Why can't the Catholic Church be a sanctuary for us? Isn't that what a church should be?"

Conclusions:

The help that immigrant Latino Catholics in Western Washington are asking for echoes the main points of the *Strangers No Longer: Together on A Journey of Hope*, a letter issued jointly by the Catholic bishops of Mexico and the United States in 1992. The bishops state in that document, among other principles:

- The human dignity and human rights of undocumented migrants should be protected. (38)
- People have the right to migrate to support themselves and their families. (35)

Latino Catholics in the Archdiocese, with and without documents, are asking for information and legal help to protect their human rights – their right to live together securely as a family, and their human right to live free of fear and racial discrimination. They have migrated to the US in order to escape threats on their lives and to earn a living to support themselves and their families – to survive – and they are asking for information and legal help in defending that right.

The same document, written 25 years ago, calls for a spirit of communion and solidarity among the first pastoral responses, followed by confronting racism:

“Faith in the presence of Christ in the migrant leads to a conversion of mind and heart, which leads to a renewed spirit of communion and to the building of structures of solidarity to accompany the migrant. Part of the process of conversion of mind and heart deals with confronting attitudes of cultural superiority, indifference, and racism;” (40)

This same message, from the bishops a quarter century ago, from Latinos today, is proclaimed again by Pope Francis in his **Message for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2018**, issued in August 2017. His message speaks directly to the life Latinos here in Western Washington described and to their requests for help. He denounces the collective and arbitrary expulsions of migrants, and he reminds us that personal safety is always a priority over national security. In clear words, he asks us promote the integrity of the family, and *“to defend the rights and dignity of migrants and refugees, independent of their legal status”* and *“ensure fair access to justice.”*

The words of Pope Francis summarize the request for help that Latinos in Western Washington voiced in this study: *“Solidarity must be concretely expressed at every stage of the migrant experience from departure through journey to arrival and return.”*