PRAYERS, ADVOCACY AND QUESTIONS: Immigration and the Church

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When members of the Annual Council of the Diocese of Virginia convened in January, they adopted two powerful resolutions. One was “toward a just and reasonable reform of the immigration system,” while the other was regarding “Virginia legislation to assist immigrants.” Both used inclusive, accessible language: “inalienable dignity and intrinsic worth”; “alleviate the oppressive conditions”; “eradicate racism, intolerance and prejudice.” And both called for action: through advocacy, through educational programs and through prayer.

But in the months following Annual Council and the adoption of those two resolutions, tensions reached a new high when it came to matters of immigrants entering the United States, as an influx of unaccompanied minors at the border crossing was met with debate on appropriate response.

The Most rev. Katharine Jefferts Schori, presiding bishop, released a statement in July, noting, “The Episcopal Church believes we have a responsibility to all our neighbors, particularly the strangers and sojourners around us.” The Rev. Gay Clark Jennings, president of the House of Deputies, wrote a commentary for Religion News Service, noting, “We must insist that the debate in Washington is not simply about treating refugees with compassion, but ensures that we hear their claims, safeguard their futures and offer their countries the assistance necessary to restore peace at home.”

Episcopal Migration Ministries created a comprehensive set of resources on the Episcopal Church’s response to the Central American migrant crisis, including a webinar, background information, bulletin inserts and links to articles and statements. Access them online at episcopalmm.org.

The Diocese’s two Council resolutions take on new meaning within the context of this developing conversation. Churches are asking themselves the best way to address these challenging issues, and many are struggling to find solutions. The Rev. Bernie Schroeder, the bishop’s deputy for governmental affairs, conducted a coffee forum at St. Mary’s, Whitechapel, to explore immigration issues. Emmanuel, Harrisonburg, hosts the Mexican Consulate on Wheels several times a year, a mobile service that helps people with passport and immigration questions and services. And still others struggle to find resources.

In the wake of the discussion surrounding children crossing the border unaccompanied, the Rt. Rev. Susan Goff issued a special statement to the Diocese following her return from a trip to Guatemala, where the immigration debate was also a subject of conversation. “We are a nation that holds children and families in high esteem,” wrote Goff, “and our immigration policies will be at their best when they honor families, promote justice, and care for the youngest and most vulnerable.” In closing, she offered what may be the Church’s most powerful contribution to the debate: prayer.

Lord Jesus Christ, beloved child of God, whose parents fled with you across the border to a foreign land so that you might live, we pray to you for the immigrant children who have come to our land. Give comfort to those who are held in detention centers as they await their futures. Give hope to family members in the United States and back home as they wait for news of their children’s fate. Inspire our political leaders to develop wise and clear policies in the midst of complex realities. And teach us all how to follow you by caring in concrete ways, as you did, for the most vulnerable among us. All this we ask for the sake of your great love. Amen. +