

Workshop Summary:

ECUMENICAL SUPPORT AROUND IMMIGRATION ISSUES

This workshop was led by the Reverend Jan Olav Flaaten, Executive Director of the Arizona Ecumenical Council, based in Phoenix. The Council coordinates the ecumenical work of churches, organizations and individuals who are committed to the visible unity of the church and the common good. Eighteen denominational groups are affiliated with the Council but the level of involvement and engagement varies; some churches affiliate as congregations because their denomination does not belong on their behalf. This work is largely accomplished through “prayer (our conversation with God), study (our conversation with each other) and action (our conversation with the world).” Immigration is among the issues taking priority at this time. For further information, see the organization’s website, <http://aecunity.net>.

The Arizona Ecumenical Council strives to interpret issues in terms of faith principles and thus to help build unity within the church for broader understanding of social issues as well as to advocate for change for the common good within the state of Arizona. This is particularly important on issues, such as immigration, where there is often a difference between the “pastor” and the “pew.” Even within the Council, however, there is often strong agreement on the goal, but different views on how to get there.

Regarding immigration, however, there is strong Council support for comprehensive immigration reform. The Bible, both Old and New Testaments, is clear about the call to welcome the stranger. The Council is committed to making sure that the faith perspective is part of how people in our churches approach this and other issues. Scripture cannot be set aside!

The Council often works through organizing efforts such as the Arizona Interfaith Network, a church-based organizing effort with regional counterparts such as Pima County Interfaith Council (PCIC). Such organizing around immigration reform led to a statewide conference in Casa Grande.

Utilizing the moral power of religious leaders, the Council also arranges conversations with legislative and other leaders. For instance, through the Council, the Methodist and Roman Catholic bishops had dinner and a three hour conversation with Janet Napolitano, head of the Department of Homeland Security, in Washington D.C.

The Council can act as an organization only when the leadership group is in agreement. At other times, however, Council study resources and dialogue leads to action being taken by member groups and individuals, even without the formal name of the Council being utilized. These actions can include letters and advocacy with legislators, letters to the editor, etc.

Summary developed from workshop notes and other sources