

# INTERFAITH IMMIGRATION COALITION

## Prayer Vigils for Family Unity & Immigration Reform

### Why Host a Prayer Vigil?

Hosting prayer vigils around the country provides people of faith an opportunity to reflect on the deep scriptural, spiritual roots of our work to support immigrants' rights and highlight the real-life consequences of our failed policies. Family Unity Vigils are part of a larger strategy to express to our elected officials in Congress that humane immigration reform is a top priority for people of faith.

**EVERYONE can be a part of this nation-wide effort**—from the smallest community of faith to large suburban congregations or city-wide coalitions! Some options for involvement include:

- Coordinate a public prayer vigil with other places of worship, inviting community members and your senators and representatives. Publicize through bulletins, websites and flyers.
- Plan a prayer vigil for your faith community, and invite an immigrant to share how their lives would be impacted by immigration reform. Invite your senators, representatives and local press outlets.
- Add a focus on immigration to an existing event—community meal, ESL classes, or discussion for your faith community. Let your senators, representatives and local press know you're doing it!
- Encourage your clergy or lay leaders to offer a sermon, litany or other major focus on immigration in worship. Let your senators and representatives know.
- Include a prayer petition about immigration within worship services, during community gatherings, or around other social times, providing community members opportunities to write letters or leave voice messages for your senators or representatives.

Whatever form your event takes, your prayers will be joined by the prayers and actions of other people of faith around the country. We ask you to focus on three areas of concern:

- 1. Humane immigration reform** that prioritizes family unity and provides a pathway to full citizenship
- 2. Empowerment of people of faith** to speak out more boldly for immigrants' rights
- 3. Moral courage for members of Congress** to show leadership by voting for immigration reform

**Register Your Event Now** by filling out this form: <http://wp.me/p2MCxv-bh>. Registered events will show up as candles on a map showing the hundreds of similar events happening around the country. You can also use the calendar to find out who else is planning events in your area. Registering your event is **IMPORTANT** — it helps us track and connect people to you and provides information so that other immigrant advocates in your town know how to get involved. Even a small event, multiplied around the country, will send a powerful message to our representatives in Congress that immigration reform is a moral issue that is important to people of faith and conscience.

**We're here to help!** Once you have adapted the press materials to your event (*see Media toolkit*), we can help send and pitch them to your local media. Contact: [nandersen@churchworldservice.org](mailto:nandersen@churchworldservice.org)



# Planning your prayer vigil

**Before planning an event, it's helpful to define your goals.** Who do you want to reach? What specifically do you want this event to accomplish? Examples include: "We want 100 people to sign a postcard to their member of congress" or "We want media coverage to show that the people of faith want immigration reform." Make sure that all speakers find a way to incorporate this vision into their prayers, songs, etc. To make your vigil effective in convincing decision makers to vote for humane immigration reform that prioritizes family unity and provides a pathway to full citizenship:

- Identify your senators and representatives who need to hear that people of faith support immigration reform, and research their faith background to reach out to leaders of that tradition
- Host your vigil in a strategic location, such as in front of their local offices
- Include the senators and representatives' names in the materials and event program
- Make and display signs that have your message for full citizenship and family unity
- Invite the local media – this will help decision maker know this is important (*see Media toolkit*)
- Take pictures; write Letters to the Editor, Opinion Editorials and blog posts; post on Facebook and send press clips to the decision maker when you set up a meeting with them

## Drawing on Symbolic and Creative Traditions

A prayer vigil for immigration reform should showcase the diversity of faiths present. While not everyone might pray in a certain language or with a certain emphasis, all faith traditions should be vibrantly expressed. Rather than asking participants to only use interfaith language, encouraging all participants to pray in their own faith tradition and voice can add power to a prayer vigil. The set up for the vigil should ensure that all faiths are respected and welcomed with awareness and consciousness.



Drawing on the faith traditions and rituals can make vigils much more powerful, raising the creative and dramatic tension. Use images and symbolism that draw attention and showcase the powerful solidarity people of faith show in working for immigration reform. Here are some examples:

- Ask Clergy attending to wear collars, stoles, robes and any other appropriate attire
- Foot washing of individuals impacted by immigration policies
- Procession with candles to symbolic location
- A Prayer Wall with handwritten prayers for family unity and full citizenship
- Utilize special events (e.g. Valentines with hearts that say "love thy neighbor")
- Invite lawmakers to read scriptures/ sacred texts supportive of immigrants' rights
- Lift up stories from community members and compare to stories in sacred texts
- Highlight passages in scripture and present to members of congress
- Collect and deliver prayers for humane immigration reform to your senators and representatives
- Make visuals – photos, drawings, art, etc. that show the consequences of immigration enforcement policies and family separation

# Planning Checklist

## 4 to 6 weeks before your event

- \_\_\_ Organize a team of congregants, faith leaders, and community members to help plan the event.
- \_\_\_ Set a date and time. Keep the length of the vigil realistic, as even an hour can be a large time commitment for some. Consider what time of day will best serve your purpose.
- \_\_\_ Invite your senators and representatives, using the below sample invitation letter. If your member cannot attend, make sure they receive the press releases and coverage.
- \_\_\_ Secure a location that will be accessible to those attending and strategic in getting the attention of your members of congress. Apply for any permits needed for the location; reserve or order any equipment you'll need such as microphones, cameras, banners, candles, projectors; and make sure you can access electrical outlets.
- \_\_\_ Choose a time of day best for attendance and Media (6pm works well for the evening news)
- \_\_\_ Invite speakers, Are there prominent faith leaders in your community who could offer a prayer? Who might serve well as a leader/emcee to get the vigil started?
- \_\_\_ Remember to register your prayer event at [interfaithimmigration.org](http://interfaithimmigration.org)!

## 2 to 3 weeks before your event

- \_\_\_ Create promotional materials and invite people through word of mouth, newsletter, bulletin, website, social media, and listservs. Distribute event information to other organizations to get the word out.
- \_\_\_ Gather the equipment you'll need—sound equipment, extension cords, chairs (especially for the elderly), a projector, etc. Might people need water or warm beverages?
- \_\_\_ Adapt the media materials (*see Media toolkit*) with quotes from your speakers and send to local press outlets. Have one of your speakers write a Letter to the Editor or Opinion Editorial calling attention to the vigil. Email [nandersen@churchworldservice.org](mailto:nandersen@churchworldservice.org) for help with media outreach.

## One week before your event

- \_\_\_ Go over vigil program (see attachment) and identify the appropriate prayers and speakers. It's good to have just a few speakers to lead, but plan for many participants to offer short prayers.
- \_\_\_ Make sure you have all equipment ready for the next day, your speakers and the emcee for your event are prepared, and everyone knows their role (sign-in table, taking pictures, handing out programs, welcoming press & handing out news release)
- \_\_\_ Prepare a sign-in sheet so you can continue to communicate with participants after the event.

## The day of your event

- \_\_\_ Arrive early—give yourself and your team plenty of time to set-up sound equipment, tables, etc.
- \_\_\_ Greet participants, give them a copy of the program and ask them to sign up for future updates.
- \_\_\_ Greet reporters, give them your press release and ask them to sign in (name, media outlet, email address and phone number) to follow up and to establish relationships for the next event

**After the event:** Send thank you notes, photos, video, and press clips from your event to attendees and your senators and representatives. Consider writing a blog post and post it on the Interfaith Immigration Coalition's Facebook page at <http://www.facebook.com/interfaithimmigrationcoalition>.

## Sample Vigil Program

Below is one example of how a vigil might be ordered, but your program may look very different—consider the resources within your community or core planning group (an exceptional church choir or cantor, local poet, sign language translator, artist, etc.), and use them to plan your vigil program.

**Welcome**—a few words about the focus and purpose of your vigil. Why now? What’s the concern? Who’s affected? How can this vigil convince your members of congress to support humane immigration reform? What values shape your faith traditions’ response to these concerns? This may take the form of brief comments from one of your speakers, or a welcome and an opening prayer.

**Opening Prayer:** Ask clergy or key lay leader to open with a prayer

**Song**—A singer, choir or instrumentalist can perform, or a few singers can lead participants in singing.

**Reading**—*for ideas see suggested readings below.*

**Speaker**—A personal story from a local community member of how the broken immigration system has impacted families. More than one story can be integrated throughout the program as well.

**Creative Ritual:** Integrate creative symbols or rituals from faith traditions that draw more attention to the importance of immigration reform (see above suggestions)

**Prayer**—One person may lead the prayers, or you might invite several faith leaders to pray according to their traditions. Involve vigil participants in praying a refrain throughout your prayer time, or pray in a circle so everyone has the opportunity to pray. Consider offering prayers in multiple languages.

**Song & Closing**—reiterate the focus and purpose of your vigil, and send participants off with a call to welcome newcomers and raise their voices in the public sphere for compassionate immigration reform. Consider a procession or march to another symbolic and strategic location.

## Sample Invite to Your Member of Congress

Dear Honorable Senator / Representative,

We would like to invite you to attend [CONGREGATION/ORGANIZATION]’s prayer vigil on [DATE] at [LOCATION]. The event is part of a national effort called ***Breaking Bread and Building Bridges***, with prayer vigils, potlucks and congressional visits taking place in communities around the country.

Families are the basic unit of strong communities. Thousands of families have been separated by detention and deportation, and should be reunited. As people of faith, we cannot sit by as families are torn apart. If we do not reform our immigration system, we risk further destruction in our communities.

We hope you will join us at this vigil to pray for immigration reform that reunites families and provides a pathway to full citizenship for undocumented immigrants. We will also be praying moral courage for our leaders in Congress to enact such reform.

We encourage you to join faith and community leaders in [DISTRICT] to stand up for immigration policies that prioritize family unity and treat all persons with dignity and respect. Please contact [CONTACT NAME] at [NUMBER] to RSVP or for additional information.

Thank you,

[List all vigil organizers]

## Suggested Readings

The Hebrew Bible tells us: "The strangers who sojourn with you shall be to you as the natives among you, and you shall love them as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt (Lev 19:33-34)." In the New Testament, Jesus tells us to welcome the stranger, for just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." (Matthew 25:40). The Qur'an tells us that we should "serve God...and do good to...orphans, those in need, neighbors who are near, neighbors who are strangers, the companion by your side, the wayfarer that you meet, and those who have nothing (4:36)." The Hindu scripture Taittiriya Upanishad tells us: "The guest is a representative of God (1.11.2)" --*Interfaith Statement for Humane Immigration Reform, 2008*

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"Why should you not hate the stranger? asks the Torah. Because you once stood where he stands now. You know the heart of the stranger because you were once a stranger in the land of Egypt...I G-d made you into the world's archetypal strangers so that you would fight for the rights of strangers – for your own and those others, wherever they are, whatever the colour of their skin or the nature of their culture, because, though they are not in your image – says G-d – they are nonetheless in Mine. There is only one reply strong enough to answer the question: Why should I not hate the stranger? Because the stranger is me." --Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the (British) Commonwealth

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"The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him yourself, for you were strangers in the Land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God." --Lev 19:34

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Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured. --Hebrews 13:1-3

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In the Qur'an, it is written that Muslims should "serve God ... and do good to ... orphans, those in need, neighbors who are near, neighbors who are strangers, the companion by your side, the wayfarer that you meet, [and those who have nothing]." (Qur'an 4:36)

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"This law of shielding the alien from all wrong is of vital significance in the history of religion. With it alone true Religion begins. The alien was to be protected, not because he was a member of one's family, clan, religious community, or people; but because he was a human being. In the alien, therefore, man discovered the idea of humanity." --German-Jewish philosopher Hermann Cohen (Dr JH Hertz, *Pentateuch & Haftorahs* (The Soncino Press, 1960), Pg 313.)

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We bid you welcome, who come with weary spirit seeking rest. Who come with troubles that are too much with you, who come hurt and afraid. We bid you welcome, who come with hope in your heart. Who come with anticipation in your step; who come proud and joyous. We bid you welcome, who are seekers of a new faith, Who come to probe and explore, who come to learn We bid you welcome, who enter this hall as a homecoming, Who have found here room for your spirit, who find in these people a family. Whoever you are, whatever you are, wherever you are in your journey, We bid you welcome. --*We Bid You Welcome*, by Richard S. Gilbert, reading number #442 from *Singing the Living Tradition*

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"... I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me...just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." --Matthew 25:35-40