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Sisters launch billboard campaign for immigration reform

By Barb Arland-Fye Catholic News Service

DAVENPORT, Iowa (CNS) -- In anticipation of the Iowa caucuses Jan. 3, 10 communities of women religious in Iowa and nearby states bought billboards throughout Iowa to deliver a call for comprehensive immigration reform.

Quoting chapter 25, verse 35 of the Gospel of Matthew, the billboards read: "I was a stranger and you welcomed me" and are signed "Jesus." But the words "a stranger" are crossed out and replaced with "an immigrant."

Sisters from 10 religious communities in the Upper Mississippi River Valley paid to have the billboards erected Dec. 12, the feast day of Our Lady of Guadalupe. On that date five years ago, federal immigration agents investigating identity theft raided Swift & Co. meatpacking plants in Marshalltown, Iowa; Cactus, Texas; Grand Island, Neb.; Greeley, Colo.; Hyrum, Utah; and Worthington, Minn.

The billboard campaign provides an opportunity to make reparations for the abuses of civil and human rights that occurred during the feast day raid and a later raid in Postville, Iowa, said Sister Johanna Rickl, vice president of the Congregation of the Humility of Mary in Davenport. Her community supports the campaign, which includes prayer services and a statement from members of the 10 religious communities.

Billboards have been placed in the Quad Cities, Des Moines, Dubuque, Cedar Rapids, Sioux City and Clinton, and will remain in place until the caucuses.

"We declare ourselves 'welcoming communities' in affirmation of our Catholic tradition that holds sacred the dignity of each person," the sisters said in their statement, "and we invite other communities and people of faith to join us in becoming 'immigrant-welcoming communities' through prayer, reflection, education and action."

The "welcoming communities" campaign draws attention to the need for comprehensive immigration reform and responds to the "Secure Communities" program that the Department of Homeland Security established in 2008 as part of its overall enforcement strategy.

The Secure Communities program "has transformed local police officers into a primary gateway for deportation," said Sister Janice Cebula, president of the Sisters of St. Francis of Clinton.

"The results in many parts of the country have been hundreds of thousands of detentions and deportations, serious civil and human rights concerns, due process violations and damaged trust between immigrant communities and local police," she added.

The group conducted a billboard campaign nearly a decade ago with the slogan "Remember

the Immigrant You Once Were." Its success inspired the religious communities to develop another campaign using a concept similar to the popular God billboards, explained Lisa Martin, communications director for the Humility Sisters.

"The situation is much more critical today," said Sister Pat Farrell, a vice president of the Dubuque Franciscans. In addition to more restrictive laws being implemented in a number of states, "the economic situation in the world is more critical and the urgency of people needing to come here is more acute than it was before," she said.

While the billboard campaign is a regional effort, the issue of comprehensive immigration reform is equally important for the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, of which Sister Farrell is president.

"It certainly coincides with LCWR's consistent stand over a period of many years to promote comprehensive immigration reform in conjunction with the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops," she said.

Both Sister Farrell and Sister Rickl have served in Central America and witnessed the suffering of people who struggle to exist in their homelands.

"I think our voice has the credibility of people who have spent years of their lives, in many cases, working on both sides of the border at the grass-roots level with people who pick crops and work at meatpacking plants and in restaurants," Sister Farrell said. "We can give personal testimony from personal relationships with people suffering because of these immigration laws. We believe that true security lies in building relationships and respecting human rights."

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