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Activists to fast on Capitol Hill until Congress passes immigration reform

Katherine Burgess Religion News Service | Nov. 13, 2013 Immigration and the Church
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As an icy wind whipped the sides of a packed tent, five activists committed themselves Tuesday to fast from food and drink and to camp in front of the U.S. Capitol until Congress passes comprehensive immigration reform.

"I know that there are going to be difficult days ahead of me," said Eliseo Medina from the Service Employees International Union. "I know that going without food will not be easy and I know that I will suffer physical hunger.

"But there is a deeper hunger within me, a hunger for an end to a system that creates such misery among those who come here to escape poverty and violence in search of the American dream."

Religious and labor leaders joined immigration activists at the launch of the "Fast for Families: A Call for Immigration Reform and Citizenship." Many will participate as "solidarity fasters," fasting for a shorter time.

The Rev. Jim Wallis, president of the progressive Christian group Sojourners, said Christians must pray against the political dysfunction, self-interest and racial polarization that has blocked immigration reform.

"Sometimes you can organize and march and struggle and work as hard as you can, and sometimes all you can do finally is pray for a miracle," Wallis said. "We're here to pray for a miracle."

The Senate has passed a bill to create a 13-year path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants who entered the country before Dec. 31, 2011. The legislation, now facing skepticism in the Republican-controlled House, also provides a faster path to citizenship for many immigrants and would improve family reunification, according to the Fast for Families website.

One of the fasters, Dae Joong Yoon, executive director of the National Korean American Service & Education Consortium, said he knows firsthand the pain of family separation due to immigration law. When his family immigrated to the United States when he was 18, he was separated from his older brother for four years.

Now, preparing to camp around the clock at the foot of the Capitol, Yoon said he realized he will miss his own children during the fast.

"But I began to think about millions of families who are separated from their loved ones," Yoon said. "This is a hard time, which requires our action."

Other long-term fasters are the Rev. Samuel Rodriguez, president of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference; Lucy Tzunun, member of Make the Road New York; and Jong Sang Hyung, member of NAKASEC.

"We're fasting in the spirit of hope," said the Rev. Barbara Williams Skinner, co-chair of the National African

American Clergy Network. "We know that Martin Luther King Jr., were he here today, would be standing here with us. Cesar Chavez would be standing with us and Gandhi would be standing with us. We think that's enough power to change the Congress."

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