

Report on the Prayer Vigil at the ICE Detention Center

On Saturday, July 27, Sue and I traveled with John and Xochitl Koppelmeyer to the ICE Detention Center in Farmville to join others in a prayer vigil. It was organized by Pullen Memorial Baptist Church in Raleigh N.C., a sister church in the Alliance of Baptists. There were 60 to 70 of us who gathered as a witness to our Christian values regarding the treatment of immigrants.

We held a morning news conference to state publicly why we were there. I was asked to speak there and lead a prayer. Then the 15 to 20 clergy went to the training site where guards and workers are trained for their duty. We gathered in a circle and prayed, especially for the guards, whom I believe are suffering what therapists who work with soldiers call “moral injury”.

Then the whole group traveled to the ICE detention facility where we prayed for the more than 700 immigrants who are being held there.

As we walked away in single file down the road to our cars, I saw two images that have stayed with me. The first, one of the officers of the facility filming us as we went by. The second, two cars passed us filled with family members on their way to visit a loved one who was being held in the center. My heart broke.

Here are the words I spoke and the prayer I offered at the news conference:

Words at the Prayer Vigil at the ICE Detention Center

July 27th, 2019

We are gathered at this vigil to, as Jesus asked of his disciples, “watch and pray”. Someone once said that it is the bravery of a book to look away from nothing. We are here today because we will not look away. Look away from the mistreatment of immigrants and refugees in our nation, most of them with darker skin. We will be judged by this period of American history where families and young children were torn apart and children put in cages.

We give witness today to a 4,000-year moral tradition that has commanded us to care for the widow, orphan and stranger, that is the immigrant and refugee. In the ancient near east care for the immigrant was a life and death matter. It still is.

Jesus said that nations and peoples will be judged by how they care for—listen to the specificity: the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, or immigrant, the naked, the sick and those who are imprisoned. That is why we are here today. He also said “In as much as you have done it unto one of the least of these, you have done it to me.” In other words, *he waits for us in them.*

The issues surrounding the immigration crisis in America are enormous and complicated. But our national leaders for two decades have been unwilling to pass a comprehensive Immigration Reform Act to address this crisis. But it is not complicated to see how immigrants and refugees are being treated today and to say, this is a moral wrong.

We will not look away; we will watch and pray; we will not call what is evil good. We will stand with those whose lives are most threatened in our land. And we will speak for them.

Prayer

We pray, O God of justice and mercy, for Your wisdom and goodness to prevail in our land.

We pray for immigrants locked away in holding areas and being deported. We pray for refugees fleeing the violence of their homelands looking for sanctuary and a place to begin their lives again.

We pray for immigrant families afraid to go to work or church and for children afraid to go to school.

We pray for our nation's leaders. Open their eyes and their hearts to the plight of the immigrant and refugees.

We pray for the guards in our holding facilities as they follow orders, and we pray for those giving the orders.

And we pray for a nation sick with fear and divided by hate.

Send Your Spirit, O God, to convict us and renew us and save our land.

In Your Holy Name

Amen