

Prayer Vigils: A How-To Guide

Adapted from a resource of the Interfaith Immigration Coalition (www.interfaithimmigration.org).

Why Host a Prayer Vigil?

Hosting prayer vigils gives people of faith an opportunity to reflect on the scriptural roots of our work in support of immigrants, the moral dimensions of the immigration issue, and the real-life consequences of our failed immigration policies. Prayer vigils also communicate to members of Congress and the administration that humane immigration reform is a top priority for people of faith.

Getting Organized: A quick how-to on planning your prayer event

Before planning any event, it's helpful to first define your goals:

- **Purpose:** What is the purpose of this event? How does a particular event move you toward your larger community, grassroots or legislative goals?
- **Audience:** Whom do you hope to reach? Do you want to reach out to your community or government officials?
- **Desired Outcome:** Be specific! Your goal can be as large as comprehensive immigration reform or as small as wanting the town mayor to issue a positive statement on immigration. The more specific you can be, the more prepared and effective you can be in your organizing.

Keeping in mind these three goals, consider the following elements when planning your event:

1. Type of event, length and location

- a. Keep the expected length and attendance of the vigil at a realistic level.
- b. Location—does it fit the tone and purpose of your event? Is it easily accessible? Does it have the proper sound equipment and electrical outlet access?
- c. Choose a location that is appropriate to the size of your event—you don't want to be in a room for 80 if your attendance is 10, or vice-versa.
- d. Make sure you have all the appropriate permissions to be at your desired location.

2. Materials and equipment

- a. What type of equipment do you need? Cameras, banners, candles, microphone, projector?
- b. Will you be printing a program for the event?
- c. Will you be outside long enough that people might need water?
- d. Will you need chairs for elderly participants?

3. Leadership

- a. Are there prominent faith leaders in your community who could attend and offer a prayer?
- b. Will there be a leader to emcee the event?

4. Recruitment—a successful event needs people!

- a. Whom do you want to attend the event and how can you make sure they do?
- b. What could prevent invitees from coming (think weather, time of day etc.)? Can any of those obstacles be avoided?

- c. What natural networks in your community or place of worship can you tap into? Who leads those networks? Invite them to assist in planning your event.
- d. Will you have a sign-in or an information booth? Who will work it?
- e. Do you want people in policy-making positions to come? Send invitations to prominent public officials.

5. Publicity

- a. Distribute event information to other organizations and have their leaders contact their members.
- b. Which media outlets can best reach your audience? Consider writing a letter to the editor of your local paper to promote your vigil.

6. Follow-up

- a. Send pictures, video and audio recordings of your event to your representatives in Congress.
- b. Collect blog posts, pictures and articles about the event.
- c. Thank those who participated.

Prayer Vigil Planning Checklist

Two to three weeks before your event

- Put together a core planning team—invite leaders of other groups whose members share your concerns.
- Secure an appropriate location.
- Find out if you will need permissions to use your location.
- Invite speakers, find a photographer if you want photos or video of your event, begin adapting promotional or media materials for the event.
- Begin inviting people to your event through word of mouth, newsletters, bulletins, websites, and the listservs of your congregation and any other group that is involved in planning your event.

One week before your event

- Begin gathering all equipment you will need—sound equipment, extension cords, chairs, projectors, coffee dispensers, etc.
- Go over vigil program and identify the appropriate individuals to speak and pray. Generally, it's good to have just one or two speakers to lead, but it may be nice to open up to the broader group to offer short prayers at the end.

The day before your event

- Make sure you have all equipment ready for the next day, your speakers and the emcee for your event are prepared, and any other people who are staffing the event know their role (in charge of the sign-in table, taking pictures, handing out programs, welcoming press and handing out news release, etc.)
- Prepare a sign-in sheet for participants, so you can continue to communicate with them after the event is over.

The day of your event

- Arrive early to set up—give yourself and your team plenty of time to set-up sound equipment, tables, etc.
- Greet participants, give them a copy of the prayer vigil program and ask them to sign up for future updates.
- Greet reporters, give them a copy of your press release, and ask them to sign in on a sheet of paper—ask for their name, media outlet, email address and phone number (you may need their contact information for the next event or to follow up).
- After the event is over, make sure to thank everyone and let them know how to stay involved!

The week after your event

- Follow up to thank your speakers and those who attended your event.

Sample Vigil Program

The following ideas will help you plan your program. Feel free to adapt these suggestions as appropriate for your audience. Also consider how resources within your community such as an exceptional church choir, local poet, sign language translator or artist could be incorporated into your vigil program.

1. Welcome

Have one of your speakers or an emcee share some brief comments on the purpose of your vigil or give a few words of welcome and offer an opening prayer that lifts up the central concerns of your vigil. Be sure to consider the following when composing your welcome:

- **What is the focus of your vigil?** For example, humane enforcement, family reunification or immigration policy reform
- **Why now?** Is there a local or national news story to which you could connect this vigil?
- **Who is affected?** Consider those who are affected by your issue. For example, if you are focusing on humane enforcement consider the detainees, their families, friends to the enforcement agencies and lawmakers.
- **What faith-based obligations do we have to consider?** Is there a theological imperative that calls us to action on immigration?
- **The three areas of focus** for prayer, renewal and action on immigration are
 - protection for immigrants
 - empowerment of people of faith to speak out more boldly for immigrants and
 - moral courage for members of Congress to show leadership in enacting humane immigration reform.

Sample Welcome for a Vigil Focusing on Humane Enforcement

Welcome! We congregate here today in the spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ to reflect on the lives of our brothers and sisters who have been detained in their search for a better life. We have come here also to ask for the strength and courage of our Lord to act through us as we call for justice. Finally we come here also to ask for our Lord and Savior to bestow wisdom on our lawmakers so that they would not shy away from their moral duty and would show compassion to all those that they serve in their bid to create a just, fair and humane immigration policy.

Through the power of our faith and in the compassion of Jesus Christ we ask that all human life be respected and that our brothers and sisters be no longer afraid, but rather that they feel the love; warmth and welcome of our great nation.”

2. Song

Consider inviting a local church choir, an instrumentalist or even a song and dance group to provide appropriate music. Or recruit some strong singers to lead such hymns as these:

- We Shall Overcome
- O God of Every Nation
- God, How Can We Comprehend?

3. Scripture

The following passages contain much that is relevant to immigration reform:

- Luke 9:46–48
- Luke 10:1–12
- Exodus 12:19
- Deuteronomy 24:19–21
- Matthew 2:13–15
- Leviticus 19:33–34
- Matthew 25:31–40
- Micah 6:6–8
- Psalm 5:11
- Psalm 9:9

4. Reflection

Invite a speaker—a community leader or local pastor—to reflect on the readings. The reflection should focus on the question of whether these readings are evidence of a theological imperative that calls our faith into action in regard to Immigration reform.

5. Prayers

One person may lead the prayers, or you may invite several people to lead them according to their traditions. Consider offering prayers in multiple languages or using bidding prayers, offering the names of detained individuals and inviting those present to pray for their safety.

To close the prayers consider inviting a small child of the congregation to lead the attendants in the following, sung to the familiar tune of “Jesus Loves Me”:

Jesus loves me where I go—
Old house, new house, sun or snow.
In my heart his love will stay.
He tells me, Be not afraid!

Jesus keeps me in his care.
Friends he gives me everywhere.
In his love best friends are made.
He tells me, Be not afraid!

Jesus gives us much to share—
Friends and food and love to spare.
His love shines and never fades.
He tells me, Be not afraid!

6. Procession of Light

Have the congregation light candles to represent not only their faith as a light in dark times but also the presence of those who are detained and fearful. Select appropriate music for reflection to accompany this symbolic gesture.

7. Speaker

Invite someone to speak on the issues that is the focus of your vigil. For example, if your focus is humane enforcement, consider inviting a former detainee or an a representative of a local immigration service agency. This will give your audience a personal connection by allowing them to identify with another’s story and gain a sense of what they can do to help.

8. Closing Your Vigil

Close your vigil with a simple prayer that reiterates your focus. Distribute educational materials or flyers advertising future or similar events, create a database of contacts so that you can further reiterate your message via e-mail in a periodic fashion and keep them informed of the work you are doing and how they can help.

Sample Closing Prayer

God of compassion and almighty wisdom, grant us guidance to carry out your mission by being a voice for the voiceless, a champion for the victims of injustice and a welcoming hand to those who are afraid. Grant us too, O Lord, the vision to see your love and presence in all our brothers and sisters as we seek to create a fair, just and welcoming community. We ask this, O Lord, through your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.