

## **Religious leaders protest immigration bill**

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### **Body**

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Dozens of Bay Area **religious leaders** - priests, nuns, rabbis, ministers and Buddhist monks - gathered on the steps of Mission Church at Santa Clara University Tuesday morning to denounce proposed federal legislation that they claim threatens to make felons of millions of illegal immigrants and the clergy who help them.

"There is a hue and a cry from the **religious** community on this," said the Rev. Carol Been, a Lutheran minister and director of the Interfaith Council on Religion, Race, Economic and Social Justice.

"It's a moral issue," she said.

The immigration reform **bill**, which is under consideration by the U.S. Senate Judiciary committee, includes tougher enforcement, a guest worker program, and a chance for illegal immigrants to obtain legal status in the United States.

The **religious leaders** criticized provisions that would make it a crime to be in the U.S. illegally, and that expand the definition of "alien smuggling" to include those who assist illegal immigrants to enter or remain in the United States. Been and others fear this means that **religious** service workers helping immigrants find jobs, learn English, and fill out immigration forms -- would be subject to criminal prosecution, too.

But this particular provision would only apply to "churches that have crossed the line" by harboring illegal immigrants, said Ira Mehlman, a California spokesman for the Federation for American Immigration Reform, a national group that advocates for tougher immigration controls and enforcement against illegal immigrants. The group does not support the **bill**, which was introduced by Sen. Arlen Spectre, because it believes its guest worker program, which allows illegal immigrants to remain in the U.S. on temporary work permits, is a kind of amnesty program.

The **religious** groups' attempt to cast the immigration reform debate as a moral issue, and their claim that the **bill** will criminalize everyone working with illegal immigrants, "is a deliberate attempt to spread hysteria," Mehlman said.

The local **protest** comes on the heels of a Lenten week call to his flock by Cardinal Roger M. Mahony, to pray for tolerant and humane immigration reform. A growing group of national **religious** organizations, joining with labor, immigrant and civil rights groups, have been campaigning for legislation that will offer illegal immigrants a path to legalization.

## Religious leaders protest immigration bill

The Services, Immigrant Rights and Education Network (SIREN), a San Jose group, has collected about 3,400 postcards signed by Bay Area opponents of the Specter **bill**, urging U.S. Sen. Diane Feinstein, (D-CA), who is a member of the judiciary committee, to reject provisions that will criminalize illegal immigrants, and **religious** workers who help them.

Martha Campos, an immigrant from Mexico, and program director for SIREN, said the support of the **religious** community and its strong stance against the senate **bill** was important.

When she immigrated to the United States in 1995, Campos said "the only place I felt safe was my church."

Feinstein has advocated for tougher border security, but she has not defined her position on the senate **bill**.

Thich Giac Luong, a Buddhist monk with the Phap Duyen Tinh Xa, a downtown San Jose Vietnamese Buddhist temple, said the effect of the Specter **bill** is to restrict freedoms.

For refugees, who fled to the U.S. in search of freedom and democracy, the legislation is not humane, Luong said.

"When the **bill** criminalizes -- by prosecution, fines and possible imprisonment -- organizations and individuals who assist undocumented persons," said the Rev. Paul Locatelli, president of Santa Clara University, "it strikes at the heart of the mandate to feed the hungry and comfort the victims of injustice."

Locatelli said the **bill** is "a revival of nativist sentiment born of fear like the 19th century when "No Irish need apply" for employment."

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