



*we are one family under God*

## Best Practices

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### ‘Best Practices for Parish Organizing’

St. Charles Borromeo parish in Arlington, VA

St. Charles Borromeo Catholic Church prides itself on living out the call to welcome the stranger among us. We do this in a variety of ways:

1) Advocacy. St. Charles has an advocacy group which puts out a biweekly electronic newsletter as well as takes part in targeted advocacy events throughout the year. Our newsletter, which provides readers with information for local, state, national and international issues on which they should take action, often focuses heavily on immigration issues. It was used often during the anti-immigrant campaign in Prince William County to rally people to go to our neighboring county and stand up for immigrants and immigrant rights. Our advocacy committee, as well as our community organizing group, VOICE, also led the Justice for Immigrants (JFI) postcard campaign earlier this year.

2) Latinos Unidos (LU). One of the things which is likely unique to St. Charles, or at least not found in many other places, is our Latino community social justice group, Latinos Unidos. This group holds charlas for the Latino community to let them know about their rights, works with local community organizing groups, and focuses on the needs of the Latino community, from special computer classes, to college scholarships, to advocacy for comprehensive immigration reform. Latinos Unidos helps to bring a large number of members of our Latino community to actions such as the Catholic Advocacy Day (CAD) in Richmond each year, where they have the opportunity to tell their personal stories and advocate for immigration reform and respect for immigrants rights in Virginia. Through LU, St. Charles likely has, along with St. Anthony’s, in neighboring Falls Church, the largest Latino presence at CAD each year.

3) VOICE. Virginians Organized for Interfaith Community Engagement, VOICE, is a community organizing group in Northern Virginia affiliated with IAF, or the Industrial Areas Foundation. VOICE is advocating for immigrant rights, to reduce the backlog of background checks, particularly for Muslim immigrants, and for comprehensive immigration reform and the DREAM Act more generally. VOICE also worked with the advocacy committee to lead the JFI postcard campaign, and to bring people to the 2010 March for Immigration Reform. Through their combined organizing efforts, we brought over 200 people to the March.

4) Borromeo Legal Project (BLP). The Borromeo Legal Project began in 2008 and provides legal assistance, citizenship mentoring and English classes to those



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seeking citizenship. Currently it is operating two ESL classes. Regarding naturalization assistance BLP provides mentoring, and financial assistance toward the filing costs where they are necessary. Currently, BLP has assisted four people with filing their paperwork. Two people are almost ready to file, and three are currently eligible but are being tutored on English before filing. In addition, BLP works with other organizations in supporting various charlas and maintains a referral network of lawyers who are willing to provide immigration assistance pro bono or at a reduced rate. This is one of the most popular volunteer opportunities that St. Charles has. We have a waiting list of volunteers--more people want to teach English or mentor those looking for citizenship than we can use. We are looking for more people who need help!

5) Crossing Borders. St. Charles has long been a supporter of the JustFaith programs. Last year, we offered the 8 Week JustMatters module, Crossing Borders, on migrants and refugees. Twenty people participated in this intensive program, and we hope to offer it again.

6) Parish awareness and involvement. One area where we excel is that St. Charles makes a concerted effort to integrate our ministries and to make sure communities are speaking with and helping each other. There are always improvements to be made, but it is something we try to be aware of and work on wherever possible. One of the exciting things that we did this year was to offer a multicultural Stations of the Cross on Wednesday nights, working primarily with our Anglo, Latino and Filipino communities, the three largest in the parish. After stations, people met to have community conversations, beginning the first night with encouraging people to tell their own "immigrant" stories, or those of their families, with simultaneous translation offered. This was a huge success and people have asked for more opportunities. In addition, we try to reach out around parish celebrations and make sure they are diverse. The direct service programs at St. Charles routinely offer help to the immigrant community. Our nurse managed health program, which offers regular medical clinics, mammograms, blood pressure screenings, and health information sessions, is always bilingual, with translators or Spanish speakers available at each session. We also work closely with the Arlington Diocese Migration and Refugee Services (MRS). Each year we participate with other parishes in the area to do a drive for household goods for refugees. In December, as part of our Giving Tree, parishioners have the opportunity to adopt a family, providing gifts for all members. Each year, we work with MRS to find 10 such families to adopt.

Lastly, the importance of support from the pulpit and from the parish as a whole, rather than from a small group within the parish, cannot be overestimated. Our pastor, Fr. Gerry Creedon, is very involved in immigration issues and preaches about them regularly. Our other priests will also preach about them on occasion, especially when it is needed, such as before the rally. Our regular involvement in advocacy events regarding immigration ensures that immigration issues are highlighted regularly in our bulletin, rather than being an occasional item. The outreach and efforts to bring our various communities together surrounding celebrations helps to make sure that we do not see anyone else as "other" and that the various groups do not feel isolated and separate from other communities. We are always searching for ways to grow the relationships between people, between ministries, and between communities.