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Morristown ministers 'insulted' by mayor's comments on illegal immigrants

BY MINHAJ HASSAN
DAILY RECORD

MORRISTOWN -- Local ministers said Wednesday that they were offended by Mayor Donald Cresitello's remark at a public meeting that they have not done anything "significant" to help the town deal with an influx of illegal immigrants.

"It's totally wrong and inaccurate," said the Rev. Phillip Wilson of the Church of the Redeemer on South Street.

Cresitello made the remark while defending his application to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to have as many as 10 local police officers deputized to enforce immigration laws and check on citizenship status.

After saying "not one minister has done anything significant" to address stacking, prostitution or slavery in the immigrant community, Cresitello added that ministers will still "put the basket out to take their money."

"I felt insulted," said the Rev. David Silva of Centro Biblico Church on Abbet Avenue. "It's an unjust remark, and it's not true. We have done a lot with our financial, material and human resources."

Workers' center plan

He said last year the Clergy Council, which includes 30 members, mostly from local houses of worship, contacted Cresitello about garnering support for a proposed workers'center, where day laborers could congregate to be picked up for work. Silva said he has not gotten support from the mayor for the project.

Cresitello, in a phone interview on Wednesday, said he stands by the statement he made at Tuesday's council meeting.

"What have they done," he said. "Show me."

The Rev. Osvaldo Jimenez, pastor at Iglesia Bautista Hispana on Washington Street, said his church has reached out plenty of times.

"We don't go around saying what we do," he said. "I don't think the mayor realizes this."


Jimenez said for the past 15 years, he has made Saturday morning visits to the Morris County jail to provide guidance to Hispanic inmates. The church has also helped in finding jobs and housing for the immigrants. It also maintains a food pantry.

The Rev. Cindy Alloway of the Presbyterian Church in Morristown on South Street also said the mayor has blocked the Clergy Council's effort to go forward with a center for immigrants seeking work.

"Sadly, you have repeatedly refused to support a worker center when it was proposed," Alloway said in a letter to the Daily Record. "Despite the faith community's recent efforts to develop a day labor worker center on church property, you said that you would oppose the development of such a worker center if it was created on either public or private property in Morristown."

Counseling, programs

Silva said his church has offered several programs in the past to aid the local immigrants, congregants and just about anybody

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Local ministers, including the Rev. Osvaldo Jimenez, of Iglesia Bautista Hispana, seen at a rally on March 26, said Wednesday that they were offended by Mayor Donald Cresitello's remark about local churches.

What the mayor said

"Not one minister has done anything significant" to address stacking, prostitution or slavery, Morristown Mayor Donald Cresitello said. "But they'll put the basket out to take their money," the mayor said of the church collection plates.

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else in the community. Other services the church has provided, according to Silva, are counseling and a life-skills program, English as Second Language classes and a Friday night program for youth to discuss life issues.

He has even brought in a friend from New York to provide people with knowledge of such things as sheet-rocking, framing and using various tools.

Silva pointed out that the "mayor and council members have never come to my church."

The pastor already has several programs lined up for the coming months. On June 2, the church will hold a health fair. On July 14, a conference on finances, and sometime during the winter, a program on work skills is planned.

Silva added he has been working every Thursday morning on the concept for a workers' center with other people and hopes to unveil plans in the near future.

Wilson said the Wind of the Spirit, the town-based immigrant resource center, has held Dead of the Day ceremonies and operates a soup kitchen six days a week, which is attended by many, including immigrants.

He also pointed out the workers' center was an idea the churches have worked hard at trying to implement but has yet to be embraced by the mayor.

Cresitello said the idea of a workers' center is a hard sell.

"Nobody is going to want that property located near their home," the mayor said. "Where are they going to put it?"

He added that he suggested to St. Margaret's Church that they open up their hall to illegal immigrants as a possible area for day laborers to be picked up, but the plan didn't go anywhere.

The Rev. Hernan Arias, pastor at the Sussex Avenue church, was not available for comment.

Business of government

Cresitello said he is not in the social welfare business, but in the business of governing Morristown. His priority is to the taxpayers and not illegal immigrants.

"They are here illegally," he said. "We don't have to cater to them."

Wilson said deputizing police officers is the wrong way to go.

"Morristown has always had a heart," he said. "He has turned that heart into stone."

Cresitello has said he wants to preserve a good quality of life for the residents, especially by addressing the stacking and public drunkenness problems that have plagued the town.

"This is much more prevalent than it used to be," he said.

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