

Faith groups lobby for health care



MATHEW SUMNER — Staff

THE REV. JAMES KECK of the Congregational Church in San Mateo will join other members of the Peninsula Interfaith Action (PIA) next week on a trip to Washington, D.C., to lobby politicians for children's health coverage.

Continued from front.

On Monday, the Rev. Jim Keck, of the Congregational Church of San Mateo, and eight other PIA representatives will meet in Washington, D.C., with 300 PICO clergy and community leaders. Together, they speak for 1 million families in 15 states — and they plan to make those voices heard on Capitol Hill.

"This is not some inappropriate mixing of religion and politics," Keck said. "This is about the wholeness and health of the entire community of God."

Addressing his parish Sunday morning, he preached: "A nation can be judged by how well it attends to its weakest, most vulnerable members. A nation that doesn't is no nation. It's just a land of dog-eating dogs."

Faith-based outreach

Although PIA is a faith-based organization, not every member belongs to a church, mosque, synagogue or temple.

Burlingame realtor Karyl Eldridge got involved five years ago through her desire to "help ordinary people dealing with skyrocketing home prices." She participates in PIA activities through the Congregational Church of San Mateo because that's where her friends worship, but she is not a church-goer.

"I'm not part of an organized religion, but I share a lot of the faith perspectives, about the fact that we're all in this together, along with the basic belief in the dignity of all human beings," she said.

PIA's message may be non-sectarian, but leaders insist there are practical reasons to empower communities of faith, rather than secular places also affected by gaps in housing and health care, such as schools and hospitals.

"People in my church who have come from Mexico don't trust pro-

grams in the U.S.," said Irais Bazan, community health advocate with the Ravenswood Family Health Center, a nonprofit clinic in East Palo Alto. "They think they're going to get in trouble. When you talk to them at church, they have more trust. They know I wouldn't lie to them."

Alvin Spencer, an East Palo Alto community organizer with PIA, adamantly agrees.

"There's a fear factor with a lot of the issues we fight for," he said. "Through PIA, in their churches, we get people to open up."

Saving themselves

In addition to their moral and ethical values, congregation leaders also have another motive for working with PIA: self-preservation.

"A lot of churches are losing members because they couldn't afford to stay in the community," Spencer said. "Families are being separated, their faith ties have been broken. People who are the souls of the community are finding themselves outpriced. It weakens the church."

Spencer's church, Faith Missionary Baptist, helped his family find an affordable home in East Palo Alto five years ago. Others have not been so lucky.

"That really hurts me, to see people who I pray with — trying to make this community better — not afford to live in this community anymore," he said. "People who live here who have faith values and a desire to live here are being forced out."

Local goals

Since forming in 1997, PIA's accomplishments range from informing families about San Mateo County's health insurance coverage for all children, to lobbying city officials to protect and expand affordable housing.

Packard hopes to recruit more congregations to PIA's roster this year. Cultural and language barriers have made it difficult to include the Pacific Islander community, which is now a PIA priority, he said.

Rather than expand across the county, Packard thinks PIA's efforts are better spent adding more congregations in the existing cities, representing a range of faiths.

"We don't want to be a mile wide and an inch deep," he said. "We want to have a strong local base so we can do things like prayer vigils in East Palo Alto for a supermarket."

National stage

From May 23 to May 25, the PICO National Network will meet with congressional representatives to secure bipartisan support on homeownership opportunities for working people and health coverage for children.

Before joining PICO in Washington, D.C., PIA leaders will discuss the national policies that most concern San Mateo and Santa Clara county residents at 7 p.m. tonight at Faith Missionary Baptist Church, 835 Runnymede St., East Palo Alto.

For more information, call (650) 592-9181 or visit www.piapico.org.

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