YAKIMA, Wash. — In an effort to expand the debate over comprehensive immigration reform beyond politics, a group of religious, business and government leaders joined Saturday to unveil a shared set of values to personalize the discussion.

“We need more people talking this through from their vantage point and station in the” Yakima Valley, said Yakima Diocese Bishop Joseph Tyson in a telephone interview. “We can’t abandon this issue only to elected officials in public life.”

The principles were originally laid out in February in a speech in Yakima given by Tyson to the Washington Farm Labor Association, but the names of those involved in shaping them weren’t formally unveiled until Saturday at an event at Heritage University. In February, they were seen as the bishop’s own take on the issue, but Tyson said that he had been working even then with the signatories to craft the message he delivered at the time.

Among the signatories were Heritage University President John Bassett, Toppenish Mayor Clara Jiminez, Inspire Development Centers CEO Tadeo Saenz-Thompson, Broetje Orchards owners Cheryl and Ralph Broetje, and numerous pastors of churches of different faiths in the Valley.

“When I wrote it, there were a lot of folks looking at those drafts to make sure it was well-aimed,” Tyson said. “Coming out of those talks, it seemed like those five principles were something that would be useful to a wide variety of stakeholders.”

The principles include the beliefs that persons have a right to find economic opportunities in their homeland and to emigrate when necessary to support themselves and their families. The third principle states that sovereign nations have a right to control and protect their borders.

Rep. Bruce Chandler, R-Granger, spoke to the third principle at Saturday’s event.
“I think it’s a national obligation to maintain secure borders. It’s to protect residents,” Chandler said in a telephone interview. “We do have challenges on our borders whether it’s by land or water or air.”

Chandler declined to discuss the particulars of the immigration reform proposal currently moving its way through Congress, which includes a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants, but said Saturday’s unveiling accurately accounts for the discomfort some face in discussing the immigration issue and yet shows the potential for a straightforward, non-politicized discussion.

“I think it’s a great outline for how to start a constructive and focused conversation,” Chandler said.

The fourth principle states refugees and asylum seekers should be afforded protection, and the fifth argues that undocumented immigrants “should have their human dignity respected” and their basic rights upheld.

Tyson said there are other leaders who support the set of principles in moving immigration reform forward, but for the time being aren’t going public because of the sensitivity of their own role in the political discussion.

“I’m impressed by the good will that I encountered from folks in the Republican and Democratic party as I engaged in this process,” Tyson said.

Tyson said he and the bishops of the other Catholic dioceses in the state are working on a joint letter addressing immigration reform that will be delivered to all of the parishes in the state in the next few weeks.

“We’re going to be directly addressing our congregations,” Tyson said.

It’s not the first time this year a coalition of state and local leaders has come out with a set of principles to further an immigration reform bill. In March, a group known as the Washington Compact that included growers, politicians, educators and various chambers of commerce and nonprofits released a five-point document stating federal solutions are needed to protect the nation’s borders while creating an immigration system that benefits citizens and businesses, as well undocumented immigrants.

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