

Immigration & St. Philips?

Part 1

Our Diocese has encouraged us to include 'immigration' among SPE's mission and outreach. This is the first of a three part series which seeks to assist our deliberations in our response.

Draughts, starvation, abusive governments, economic disasters, warring religious sects, seeking a better or safer existence for family, have produced over 100 million immigrants and refugees around the globe. The number and plight of these peoples (1% of world's population) continue to grow. In the US, the focus is mainly on the 11.2 million unauthorized immigrants. The actual number of US immigrants" (i.e. people born outside of the US) is 43.2 million, or 13.4% of our current population. When you add in their family members, 84 million (or 27%) of our country's population resides in 'immigrant' families. While our nation was built on waves of immigration since even before its founding, it is the current pace and source of immigration and particularly the presence of 11 million undocumented ('illegal') immigrants that pose the thorniest issue for our country.

Sadly BOTH national political parties as well as conservatives and liberals, have used 'immigration' as a major dividing and motivating issue rather than working toward any solutions. Both sides selectively invoke partial facts, or only the facts that justify their viewpoint, to inflame the debate and their constituencies. The result is a leadership void and a resultant public policy impasse. This confusion and acrimony also chill many entities from undertaking needed assistance. Meanwhile families and communities suffer.

Concerns and Realities

Claim: Criminal or dangerous immigrants are pouring across our borders.

Reality: Asia accounts for 27% of immigrants. Over half of all immigrants have been here more than 15 years (72% for 10+ years) with most coming from rural areas during severe downturns in their countries' economies or violent upheavals in their governments or regions.

Claim: Any 'undocumented' immigrant is de facto a criminal.

Reality: Their "crimes" are civil or administrative violations (not having documentation upon entering, or failing to renew, or not knowing how to renew original permits). This might be analogous to our driving an expired, driver's license. Once deemed 'illegal or undocumented', current law and enforcement practices effectively preclude seeking a remedy to 'become legal.' The undocumented status invariably leads to numerous other infractions such as seeking work without a SSN, using a false SSN for tax withholding, or false driver's license for identification.

Claim: No amnesty! They should not be rewarded for having violated the border law. They should all be deported... or at a minimum, they should have to stand in line behind those who have applied legally.

Reality: The cost to taxpayers (and adverse impact on the economy) of rounding up and deporting 11 million would be ruinous. Not providing some 'process' by which these individuals can become documented, perpetuates and compounds the problem. The proposal to have such undocumented individuals to "get in line" behind all other documented immigrants was actually in most legislative proposals. The process proposed for going from provisional status to citizenship was 13-15 years of tax paying and 'clean' citizenship.

Claim: They should have to learn English and swear allegiance to the US.

Reality: This is already a requirement for citizenship.

Claim: Immigrants are a major source of terrorists in the US.

Reality: Nearly every major terrorist or mass shooter incident in the US since 9/11 have been – loners or disaffected - US citizens.

Claim: Immigrants are in poor health and are a major source of diseases that threaten our population.

Reality: Immigrants do come with the endemic health issues of their countries, with resultant been incidences of some illnesses (such as TB), these are not epidemic threatening. Other studies have shown that immigrants have less incidence of heart disease, strokes etc. That undocumented immigrants are not eligible for Medicaid, Obamacare and reluctant to go to federal clinics or ED's because of their status, no doubt compounds their health issues.

Claim: Once they get here, immigrants can bring in dozens more.

Reality: Immigrants are limited in the number of immediate family members they can sponsor and even here, subject to verification, background and criminal record checks.

Claim: All undocumented immigrants, once found, should be immediately deported – period!

Reality: The current policy of search, detention, & deportation without regard to family status or evidence of any other wrong doing is not only anti-family and no doubt, compounding future costs for our society. The custody and deporting process is neither quick, humane nor efficient.

Claim: Immigrants use up precious tax dollars that support education, health care etc.

Reality: The IRS, itself reports over \$11.6 billion in taxes paid last year by unregistered immigrants. Similar calculations have been estimated for state and local tax collections. Additional billions in annual federal tax revenues and an estimated additional \$1.5 trillion growth in the GDP over the next decade would occur if all 11 million undocumented immigrants were to be legalized.

Claim: Immigrants work for wages and/or take under the table payments that suppress wages and reduce (state and federal) tax receipts.

Reality: Immigration reform that puts all workers (and employers) on equal and transparent footing would exert upward pressure on both tax receipts and wages.

Claim: Immigrants take jobs away from American citizens.

Reality: Most undocumented immigrants work in industries that report shortages in willing workers. Nearly half of agricultural workers, 17% of construction workers, and 12% of food workers lack legal immigration status. Many of our Brunswick County employers have indicated they could not maintain the workforce they need without such currently undocumented laborers.

Next week: *“Seeking Guidance from our Christian Faith and Episcopal Values”*

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Part 2

Given the highly emotional feelings on all sides of “the immigration issue,” in our consideration as to what - if any - steps SPE might take, let’s look at our Christian faith, Episcopal traditions, the Bible, and the teachings and example of Jesus Christ for guidance. In short WWJD...What would Jesus do?

As Episcopalians, our Baptismal vows (BCP) include affirming that:

We will seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves;

We will strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being.

In the Old Testament we are told that the Lord directs us to:

‘show kindness and mercy to one another; do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor...(Zechariah 7)

You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. (Exodus 22:21)

When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself.... (Leviticus 19)

You and the alien who resides with you shall have the same law and the same ordinance. (Numbers 15:16)

New Testament teachings include:

As you have done it unto the least of these my brethren, you have done it unto me. (Matthew 25)

Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. (Romans 12:13)

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers.....remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them. (Hebrews 13)

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works?....faith by itself, if it has no works is dead. (James 1)

Jesus and his family were undocumented immigrants after his birth and flight into Egypt (Matthew 2:13-15)

Paul urges amnesty for the runaway slave (Philemon)

Jesus was an illegal immigrant! Matthew 2:13-15 documents the flight of Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus to Egypt against the law of the land - orders of Herod, the king. Still preserved in the old town of Cairo, in Moslem Egypt is a Coptic Christian church that is built over the cave in which Mary, Joseph and Jesus hid (with the assistance of families in that community) for much of their three years in Egypt.

Next Week: *Steps we might take as individuals ... and/or as a congregation*

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Part 3

So what might we do here at St Philips? First, we might try not to be caught up in the emotional or the political debate and seek instead to respond as fellow human beings...as Christians. Getting involved in the struggles of immigrants or refugees is not our only mission here at SPE but surely it is one of the most pressing ones facing 350,000 fellow residents in NC, 11 million fellow beings here in the US and a hundred million souls worldwide. There are a wide range of options that we might consider as a part of our prayerful deliberations:

A Few Possibilities.....

1. Praying and working at dropping personal or political prejudices, and looking at all individuals without respect to color, ethnicity or national origins, or economic standing.... but as brothers and sisters in Christ.
2. Encourage our elected decision-makers to adopt reasonable policies that deal intelligently and compassionately with the issue...and doing so without unnecessary disruption of families or working communities.
3. Knowing more about immigrant individuals in our county, where they live, more about their fears and struggles, their cultures and celebrations (such as recent Cinco De Mayo celebration in Shallotte). Even inviting them to participate in our faith journey here at SPE or participating in theirs.
4. Identifying and actively supporting those resources within our communities or county that are engaged in assisting immigrant families and individuals (example St Brendan Catholic Church in Shallotte).
5. Look to co – sponsor or expand the immigrant outreach and assistance that are undertaken by other entities or faith communities (Catholic and Lutheran Charities).
6. Undertake our own new ‘immigrant initiative’ such as: identifying willing members of our congregation that might train and serve as English as a Second language instructor or as an Accredited Immigrant Representative to help immigrants gain more permanent status; or establish a small fund to help immigrant families obtain needed legal assistance for such. Both Catholic and Lutheran ministries have efforts that could serve as examples or collaborative partners).
7. Target any Habitat, construction or housing volunteer assistance to immigrant populations – especially those whose families have been split by current policy enforcement.
8. Seek to provide housing/housing assistance for immigrant or refugee families in our midst.
9. Have SPE become what is known as a ‘sanctuary’ for immigrants who are in immediate fear of being deported or homes being broken...until a full legal evaluation can be done.
10. Joining with area Episcopal churches – like St Paul’s in Wilmington – in supporting/undertaking immigrant family assistance and legal counseling.

What are your ideas?

What should St. Philips Episcopal do?