



Loving Thy Neighbor

Immigration Reform and Communities of Faith

Sam Fulwood III September 2009



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*And if a stranger sojourn with thee in your land, ye shall not vex him.
But the stranger that dwelleth with you shall be unto you as one born among you,
and thou shalt love him as thyself; for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt:
I am the LORD your God*

Leviticus 19:33-34

Introduction and summary

As a fresh immigration reform debate gears up in Washington, D.C., a wide range of faith groups are showing a new, unexpected, and grassroots-led social activism that's rooted in theological and moral ground. While loud and shrill anti-immigrant voices dominate much of the media attention regarding immigrants and especially the undocumented faith community activists are caring and praying in the shadows of public attention.

These groups have worked for many years and across the country on immigration issues and as strong advocates for undocumented workers and their families. Their efforts include creating citizenship projects, offering educational and support services, fighting discrimination and exploitation, bridging gaps between immigrant and nonimmigrant communities, providing sanctuary for immigrant families, supporting comprehensive legislative reform, and more.

Hundreds of diverse faith communities have been active independently and within larger organizations. Mainline Protestant denominations, Catholic parishes, Jewish congregations, and others, along with groups such as PICO, the Interfaith Immigration Coalition, Sojourners, Catholic Social Services, Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, Families United, and Gamaliel have stood up and spoken out on behalf of immigrants and their families.

But lately, these efforts are gaining new energy and spreading around the country as people of faith are championing the cause of immigration reform. This is an important development because it heralds a sweeping grassroots movement that will support political leaders in Washington who join their cause.

The ancient scriptures describe the stories of immigrants—people cast out of their native land who wander in the world's wilderness and seek refuge in foreign places. It's an epic saga, filled with struggle and conflict, despair and deliverance. Little wonder that present-day people of faith find parallels in the lives of immigrants in this country.

Of course, the travails of people fleeing poverty-stricken Latin America or the war-ravaged Middle East to come to the United States are very different from the patriarchs' journey to Egypt in search of food or the exile of Israelites after their homeland fell to Assyria and Judea fell to Babylon. Or are they?

The specific details may vary, but the plight of an immigrant is as old as humanity. From biblical antiquity to the 21st century, the response of people of faith remains constant, following the admonition to ease the burdens of strangers in their midst.

This report is a collection of present-day immigrant stories. Unlike the more familiar narrative of oppression in a foreign land, these are stories of faith in the flesh, of people filled with the conviction of their religious beliefs and pushed to act in defense of needy neighbors in their community.

The report also intends to be an antidote to the mistaken belief that ordinary people of faith are not involved in political advocacy or shy from pressing their influence in national debates and policies affecting immigrants. As these stories demonstrate, many efforts sprang up at the grassroots, independent of each other and often without awareness that anyone or any other group was concerned about this issue. People of faith pitched in to help fellow humans whose lives seemed very different from their own, and they were spurred on by a sense of moral outrage at the detentions of undocumented immigrants in their communities.

Several of these stories haven't been widely told and therefore aren't a part of the media chatter in the debate over immigration reform. This must change if comprehensive immigration reform is to earn broad and popular support. Faith-based activism must become part of the public debate.

This is especially important to counteract media portrayals of immigrants, many of which are unabashedly negative.

For instance, a recent Brookings Institution report concluded that “the U.S. media have hindered effective policymaking on immigration for decades, and their impact has been increasing in recent years as a result of an ongoing evolution in the media industry.” That report, released before last year's presidential election, painted an unflattering portrait of both the media's role and the public's embrace of the worst view of immigrants:

Deeply ingrained practices in American journalism have produced a narrative that conditions the public to associate immigration with illegality, crisis, controversy, and government failure. Meanwhile, new voices of advocacy on the media landscape have succeeded in mobilizing segments of the public in opposition to policy initiatives, sometimes by exaggerating the narrative of immigration told by traditional news organizations. The combined effect is to promote stalemate on an issue that is inherently difficult to resolve and that is likely to resurface on the public agenda when a new administration and a new Congress take office in January 2009.¹

The overlooked and untold story in the media is one of a revitalized and aggressive progressive movement of faith-based activities—town hall meetings, prayer vigils, potluck suppers

and, in one dramatic case, a 143-mile pilgrimage—taking place in small towns and urban centers, spreading almost virally from community to community across the United States:

- Between January and July of this year more than 25,000 people gathered in churches to call for immigration reform and an end to the separation of immigrant families as part of the Families United Tour. Led by Hispanic Evangelical churches, the tour brought together clergy and people of faith from numerous faith traditions in 24 cities around the country, highlighting the stories of local families who had been torn apart due to the broken immigration system.
- In February, at the invitation of the Interfaith Immigration Coalition, a network of religious groups working on immigration reform, people of faith gathered at 167 events in 133 cities for prayer vigils to protect immigrants and their families and to persuade congressional members to enact comprehensive reform.
- In April, during the Congressional Passover/Easter recess, people of faith conducted more than 50 “neighbor to neighbor” in-district visits with members of Congress in 24 states.
- In May, to commemorate the first anniversary of the Agriprocessors Inc. plant raid in Postville, IA (see below) more than 40 commemoration events were held in 15 states.
- In August and September, people of faith in 29 states led congressional visits, circulated petitions, and gathered at prayer vigils and potluck dinners—more than 100 events in all.

This wave of momentum from people of faith was spawned by the failure of political leaders in Washington to pass immigration reform that would bring 12 million immigrants and their families out of the shadows.

Recent attempts at federal immigration reform have fallen short due to the success of anti-immigrant activists in whipping up fear and blaming immigrants for everything from taking jobs to using benefits to committing crimes. Some anti-immigrant activists and policymakers go as far as condemning immigrants as a danger to national unity and public safety.² Such views ignore the complexities of immigration and the reality of immigrants’ lives, not to mention the fact that for most of the nation’s history, limits on immigration did not exist. We are a country of immigrants whose institutions, economy, and culture have come from the labor and contributions of immigrant men and women.



Eileen McGovern, BVM, comforts family members on the day of the raid in Postville. Note the ankle bracelet the woman is wearing, as she is under house arrest following the raid. Many of the mothers, who were released to care for their children, still don the security device, waiting final word on their fate in the United States.

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