



WASHINGTON PHOTOGRAPHY



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.

Faith communities stand up and speak out

The Rev. Sandra Castillo, pastor of Nuestro Senora de las Americas Episcopal Church in Chicago, said her largely Spanish-speaking congregation has been active in “immigration ministry” going back to the 1980s. “Being a pastor in this community, I can’t avoid putting a human face on immigration issues and that, for me, is the face of Jesus,” she said in a recent interview. “Most of the congregants are immigrants or children of immigrants or married to immigrants. There is no way we couldn’t be involved.”

Castillo, however, questioned whether English-speaking, nonimmigrant churches shared the same zeal for faith-based activism to assist immigrants in their communities. Many U.S. churches have been slow to embrace immigration advocacy as a faith mission, said Bill Mefford, civil and human rights director for the General Board of Church and Society of the United Methodist Church in Washington, D.C.

“The immediate response of the faith community is to serve, minister to the needs of people, not to call our senators or representatives in Washington,” he said. “We have to make political action churchy to push religious people into taking actions that will ultimately bring change.”

The wakeup call for many in the faith community came in 2006 with the House passage of the Border Protection, Antiterrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control bill, H.R. 1433. The proposal, authored by Rep. Jim Sensenbrenner (R-WI), would have criminalized undocumented immigrants and those who assist them including, some feared, pastoral care for immigrants among other harsh anti-immigration penalties.

That was more than many in the religious community could stand. In particular, Cardinal Roger Mahony instructed the priests in his Los Angeles-based archdiocese to disobey the law, if it passed, effectively urging holy acts of civil disobedience.³ In a widely circulated op-ed published by *The New York Times*, Mahony admitted to being widely criticized for “meddling in politics,” but defended his call to action as a part of his religious tradition. “It is our Gospel mandate, in which Christ instructs us to clothe the naked, feed the poor, and welcome the stranger,” he wrote.

Mahony’s defiance brought even more religious leaders en masse to the immigration battle, said Kevin Appleby, director of migration policy and public affairs with the U.S.

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Conference of Catholic Bishops. “We started to see people come out of the woodwork that we hadn’t seen before,” he said.

In fact, in the spring of 2006 hundreds of thousands of immigrants and their families and friends protested the criminalization provisions of the House-passed bill by participating in peaceful marches in dozens of cities across the United States.

As immigrants expressed their frustration with the House bill, the Senate, for its part, passed broader legislation that would have legalized most of the 12 million undocumented immigrants—the same people the Sensenbrenner bill would have turned into criminals—with 23 Republican votes. Though both congressional chambers passed immigration bills, there was no effort to reconcile the different versions. The 109th Congress expired without an immigration bill being signed into law.

In 2007 the Senate attempted to pass a reform bill that failed on the Senate floor and the House did not take any reform legislation. The collapse of the 2007 immigration bill was significant because federal lawmakers failed to produce an effective reform. The fallout was felt far from Washington’s corridors of power.

The impact of Congress’ inaction quickly appeared in local communities across the land, from Prince William County, VA to Hazleton, PA to Farmers’ Brance, TX. Anti-immigrant ordinances passed in statehouses and municipalities. No hiring of immigrants. No renting to immigrants. No benefits of any sort to immigrants.

All this occurred with the nastiest rhetoric spewing like an open sewer from radio talk shows and other media outlets. The overall effect was to dehumanize the stranger in our midst. From there, it was a short trip to an upsurge in immigration workplace raids. Much of it took place with television cameras rolling, capturing heartbreaking scenes as hundreds of immigrants were shackled and carted off to prison and children left behind, only because some desperate immigrants dared to work in the United States without papers.

The increase in raids and local immigration battles during 2007 and 2008 forced people to draw a moral line in the sand and decide where they were going to stand. The raids brought home the urgency and fear immigrants were feeling and compelled many in the faith community to redefine what the term “family values” really meant.

The activities described in this report grew in large measure from these local struggles. The faith community responded to urgent crises crippling local communities through direct service in hometown churches or advocacy in Washington.

The faithful began to see themselves as a bridge for dialogue and reconciliation. Little by little, as the Interfaith Immigration Coalition began to coordinate national actions on this issue, many of these groups connected with one another to form larger, powerful, and

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influential networks that could make demands at City Hall, in state houses, and of course on Capitol Hill.

In addition to showing a huge increase in local activities, new partnerships have been forged. Officials representing conservative groups such as the Christian Reformed Church and the National Association of Evangelicals are joining with long-engaged groups such as the Latino evangelical churches and Jewish community centers. In many cases and in community after community, Latino and white Americans speak increasingly about immigration in more than moral and righteous terms. Their language suggests less about helping the “poor immigrant.” Instead, they reflect a growing recognition that the immigrant belongs to a shared faith community.

This is an energizing development for many of these religious folks, and some at the grassroots are becoming engaged in a political movement for the first time in their lives. They are learning what it feels like to be a part of something larger than their own private expressions of faith.

In all of the stories that follow there is the example of faith-led compassion discovering that it never exists in a vacuum and that no one is alone. These stories prove that Americans, motivated by faith and personal relationships, are taking up the business of improving the lives of fellow human beings—the strangers that dwell among us.

Pilgrimage arrives at a detention center.



Faith in action

Postville raid

It started as a rumor, the sort that heralds a calamity for others but not anyone Sister Mary McCauley thought she knew. As the pastoral administrator of three small rural Iowa parishes, she knew that immigration officials were threatening national crackdowns on undocumented workers. But she didn't think it could happen anywhere near her in the Iowa outback.

Early morning on May 12, 2008, while tending to parish business, Sister Mary answered a phone call from a reporter in Des Moines. Could she confirm that a raid was going down in Postville?

By 10:30 a.m., the rumor confirmed itself. Helicopters flew overhead, bending corn fields below en route to Agriprocessors Inc., a kosher meatpacking plant in Postville, IA, a town of about 2,300 people in the far northwest corner of the state. Federal agents representing the U.S Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE, division of the Department of Homeland Security, swarmed the sprawling facility, arresting 389 undocumented workers.⁴

Meanwhile, federal officials set up a makeshift detention center at the National Cattle Congress, a nearby fairground in Waterloo, IA. Over the next several days the undocumented workers were processed on a judicial assembly line. They were given a week to plead guilty to document fraud and receive a five-month jail sentence or they would face trial for aggravated identity theft and a mandatory two-year minimum sentence: a disturbing Hobson's choice for the most vulnerable among us.

Just as fast and sudden as the raid occurred, Sister Mary sprang into action immediately after confirming the raid had happened in one of her parishes. She enlisted a young, bilingual parishioner to tell everyone that St. Bridget's Parish Catholic Church in Postville was open for assistance. By evening the sanctuary filled up with people too afraid to return to their homes.



Sr. Judy Callahan, BVM comforts family members on the day of the raid in Postville. Many inhabited St Bridget Church as a safe haven, where they were given a place to sleep and food. Here, many gathered to lend assistance and comfort those most affected by the raid.

“I think St. Bridget’s was considered a safe haven,” Sister Mary said in an interview a year later. “They came to see who was taken. Was their aunt there? Was their uncle there?”

This church, once too small to afford its own priest, was now an overflowing “clearing house” for the shattered community in Postville. For six consecutive days, the 400 “refugees” lived in the church. They were joined by church staff and community members—immigration lawyers, doctors, teachers, and a host of others—all wanting to help.

The Postville raid had several unintended and unexpected consequences. The town lost about half its population, shrinking to about 1,800 residents. Businesses folded. Remaining residents shuddered with anxiety over how to rebuild their devastated community.⁵

But it wasn’t all doom and gloom. An interfaith community rallied around Postville. Jewish groups from all over the Midwest, especially the Jewish Community Action of the Twin Cities in St. Paul, MN, and the Jewish Council on Urban Affairs, or JCUA, in Chicago devoted human and financial resources to helping the immigrant community.

Protesters of the raid line the streets of Postville during the July 26 march. Oftentimes, the parents are here illegally, working to provide a better life for loved ones back home in Guatemala. Their children are American born, and so have rights, but the parents do not. Because of their situation, children become orphans as they watch their parents being hauled away by ICE agents.



COURTESY OF THE SISTERS OF CHARITY OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY, DUBUQUE, IOWA.

Altogether, these interfaith groups assisted families of the Postville raid by raising more than \$1.75 million. Earlier this year, the faith leaders led an effort to bring van loads of food to the community pantry and donated clothing. Another weekend, Jewish leaders ushered in immigration law experts to assist the local legal team.

Gradually, the relationship started to change. What began as a cooperative humanitarian effort morphed into a coordinated interfaith show of support for the undocumented workers and a political movement to change federal immigration policies.

A solidarity march and rally last July attracted an estimated 900 activists, including some 350 Jewish activists (including two bus loads of teenagers from a Wisconsin summer camp). Fifteen-year-old Jonathan Ribnick spoke for the teens when he said, “We’re not here because we want kosher meat. We’re here for the people. We care how people are being treated.”⁶

Currently the coalition formed in the aftermath of the Postville raid is working together and with the Postville community under the leadership of Lutheran Pastor Steve Brackett to develop the Postville Community Benefits Alliance.

The goal of the alliance, explained Tom Walsh of the Jewish Council on Urban Affairs, would be “to prevent the wrongs of the past—the mistreatments of workers, both in terms of wages and safety and health, in terms of housing, four bedroom homes with 12-15 guys.” The coalition has successfully earned the support of state Representative John Beard and state Senator Mary Jo Wilhelm.

Meanwhile, immigration has become a defining issue for these faith leaders and their constituencies.

In conjunction with JCA and the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, the JCUA started the national Jewish campaign for immigration reform. They mobilized over 4,000 people for their first campaign, Progress by Pesach, to sign a petition declaring immigration raids a failed strategy and calling for humanitarian immigration reform.

Passover seemed a fitting time for the campaign: The holiday honors the escape of the wandering Israelites from enslavement in Egypt and, in 2009, it coincided with the end of the Obama administration’s first 100 days, which they felt was an appropriate deadline to demand progress.⁷

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Mary McCauley, Sister of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Dubuque, Iowa, with a mother and children, whose husband/father was arrested in the May 17, 2008, raid. St Bridget Parish fed and housed many families who were torn apart as a result of the ICE raid, housing some for more than a year.



The campaign began in early 2009 but was stricken with a new sense of urgency when President Barack Obama said in August that the new congressional fight for immigration reform would be postponed until 2010.

JCA organizer Lauren Bastien noted the role of Postville in waking up the Jewish community to these issues. That's why Father Paul Ouderkirk and Paul Rael of Postville's St. Bridget's Church were chosen to speak at the JCA's Immigrant Rights Freedom Seder, she said.

The allied Catholic and Jewish groups are now engaged in phase two of their national campaign for comprehensive immigration reform in 2009, titled *We Were Strangers, Too*.

Welcoming Immigrants Network

Lori Stafford, a Methodist lay person in Dallas, wept as she recalled the precise incident that made her understand the plight of immigrants in her community. That moment occurred during a church conference in Arkansas entitled *Welcoming the Sojourner*, where activists were involved in a project to end the human trafficking across the Mexican border.

One of the speakers related Jesus' admonishment of his disciples for failing to feed, clothe, and comfort a stranger. Stafford, a quality engineer with an aerospace firm, took the sermon as a message for her to put her beliefs in action. "I understood that sermon was God speaking to me," she said. "God called me to be involved in changing the way immigrants are treated in Texas."



2009 Interfaith Comprehensive Immigration Reform Prayer Vigil.

She left the conference inspired to work with others to organize a meeting last January with legislators in Austin, the Texas state capital. That meeting led to an idea for a February prayer vigil, which attracted scores of people with almost no publicity.

"I was surprised by the response because it was supernatural," Stafford said, choking up once again. "The people who attended were Muslim, Jewish, Christian, and many, many other faiths. I sincerely believe it was the Lord who put that together."

But that was only the start. Stafford quickly realized that for her tiny efforts to grow she needed organizational help.

Meanwhile, in another part of Texas, the Rev. Dean Reed, pastor of First United Methodist Church in Stephenville, a small community about 70 miles southwest of Fort Worth, was wrestling with his own faith-led challenges related to immigration reform.

For more than a decade, even before he took over the church in the largely Anglo and politically conservative town, Reed had been concerned about Mexican immigrants who crossed the border in search of jobs in Texas and other parts of the United States.

But Reed's efforts on their behalf had been halting and limited. His congregation offered English classes as part of their ministry, but he felt much more was needed.

While exploring the culture, history, and language of the Mexican people, Reed also looked deeper into his own roots and discovered a powerful point of contact between them: immigration.

"It dawned on me that we share the immigrant experience," he said. "It happened in my family over 250 years ago, and it's happening for them now. But in both cases it is a decisive moment born of need and desperation."

Reed's family immigrated to the United States in 1756 to flee a famine in Ireland. For a long period his ancestors were reviled Irish outcasts in this country. "But despite that, we were allowed to come and given a chance," he said. "And I think most people would say we are a positive element in the country today. Today's immigrants are despised by many. It only seems fair to allow them the same chance someone allowed us."

This personal message became the text of many sermons as Reed led his congregation, a progressive island in a sea of conservative Texans. Still, he felt the call to do more to help immigrants in the surrounding area.

"I hadn't been all that politically engaged in the issues surrounding immigration," he said. "But as I have become more involved in the lives of our immigrants, I have seen firsthand how harsh, unforgiving, and punitive our immigration laws are. It needs to be changed."

Reed's desire to go beyond preaching in the pulpit to engaging in politics at the poll box required him to find new allies and strategies to move more people.

"Seeing the heartache, hardship, and impossible circumstances immigrants face, I gained a clear conviction that I needed to help them by networking for the sake of change in our immigration system," Reed said. "When I reached out, an immediate response came from Lori, and she turned out to be my true partner on the project."

Reed and Stafford joined forces—she filled with passion and zeal, he sober minded and analytical—to create a statewide, grassroots organization that lobbies lawmakers, educates the public, and organizes faithful citizens to work for immigration reform.

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Breaking Bread and Barriers event.

Their organization—the Welcoming Immigrants Network, or WIN—is about six months old. It boasts a Facebook page and an impressive email contact list that is growing beyond Texas. “I don’t know how, but people find us,” Reed said. “In the short time we’ve been up and running we’ve collected hundreds of members in places as far away as Georgia, Florida, and California.”

Reed said the idea behind WIN is to channel religious belief into political advocacy for immigration reform. “We’re all about trying to inform people about the problems and to give them handles on how to solve it.”

What are those handles?

“We seek to educate people about the problem, tell them how they can take action, and give them opportunities to connect with others of like heart and faith,” Reed said.

For example, Stafford created two events in the Dallas area—a prayer vigil and a “Breaking Bread and Barriers” covered-dish dinner—where people of different backgrounds gathered to learn about immigration reform. In Fort Worth, Reed and others with WIN planned “An Evening of Compassion” where ordinary, middle-class Anglos were exposed to conversations that allowed them to see, hear, and feel the depth of the immigration system’s brokenness. Then, they were asked to help make a difference in other people’s lives.

“At every opportunity, we’re telling people in Texas and elsewhere to contact their congressman and senators,” Reed said. “We’re letting people know that we care and we want the situation to change.”

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North Carolina town hall

Sandra Hernandez is a tiny and soft-voiced woman. Her English isn't the best, but it didn't prevent her from telling a story at a recent North Carolina town hall meeting that brought tears to many eyes.

Hernandez misses Francisco Javier Calderon, her husband and the father of her two children. They were high school sweethearts who married early and set out together to seek jobs and a better life in the United States.

For a while all was well. They found jobs and began to raise their two children, Fernando and Leticia. Hernandez became a naturalized citizen in 1996 and has worked ever since to make her husband a legal resident too. But her husband's paperwork got ensnarled in the red-tape nightmare of U.S. immigration policy.

Now the family is divided. Hernandez and the children live in Alamance County, NC, just outside of Greensboro. Calderon is in El Salvador, fighting with federal officials from long distance and hoping one day to reunite with his family.

"Every time we get our hopes up, something goes wrong," Hernandez said in Spanish. Her 12-year-old son Fernando translated for his mother for the English speakers gathered in the sanctuary of Congregational United Church of Christ in Greensboro.

Hernandez wondered aloud why such a thing was happening to her family. "Is it incompetence or ill will that is keeping him from us," she said. "How can it take six months to review a marriage license?"

Hernandez was one of a half dozen speakers at the immigration town hall meeting that was called as a show of support by a faith-led coalition of immigration reform advocates. Their overarching objective was to pressure Sen. Kay Hagan (D-NC) to join their cause for comprehensive immigration reform.

Lori Fernald Khamala, director of the North Carolina Immigration Rights Program in Greensboro, said the town hall was one of a series of similar gatherings across the nation aimed at drawing political support for immigration reform.



As her son Francisco translates from Spanish to English, Sandra Hernandez tells a North Carolina town hall meeting that immigration laws have broken her family.

She said North Carolina is a key state because the immigrant population has grown 1,000 percent over the past decade, largely drawn by the state's once-booming economy and the need for unskilled workers in agricultural and manufacturing jobs.

But at the same time there's been a political backlash against all immigrants, which is fueled in part by resentment in the rise in undocumented workers and by the resulting scapegoating of immigrants for the state's more recent economic woes.⁸

Hagan, a recently elected Democratic senator, didn't attend the meeting in her hometown. But she sent Tony Caravano, an aide in her regional office, to take notes and report back about what happened at the meeting.

Caravano said he came only to listen. During a question-and-answer period, he deflected committing Hagan to any course of action on immigration reform. "The main reason that Sen. Hagan has asked me to be here today was to listen," he said. "I will tell her all that I saw and heard here."

He heard plenty.

Speaker after speaker implored the senator and other federal officials to pass legislation that would remove barriers and make it less burdensome for people to legally enter this country.

Maria Palmer, director of multicultural student affairs at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical University in Greensboro, begged the congregation to write multiple letters to federal officials. She said one congressman told her it took 16 letters before he realized that people were serious about any one issue.

"So please don't let this just be one night's sacrifice out of your life," she said. "The families like Sandra Hernandez's cannot forget this for one night."

The Rev. Julie Peebles, pastor of the host church, said the turnout of more than 200 people suggested that progressive activists are moved by faith to help bring about immigration reform. She said there wasn't any hesitation on her part to volunteer the church for the town hall meeting with political overtones.

"Jesus was one of the most political immigrants I've ever encountered in the Bible," she said. "I don't see a thing wrong with educating people about this issue inside a church."

Jesus was one of the most political immigrants I've ever encountered in the Bible. I don't see a thing wrong with educating people about this issue inside a church.



Nearly every pew of Congregational United Church of Christ in Greensboro, NC, is filled for a town hall meeting on immigration reform.

Pilgrimage

On February 24, teams of federal agents swooped into Yamato Engine Specialist Ltd., an auto repair and manufacturing firm in Bellingham, WA, and detained 25 men—22 Mexican nationals, one Salvadoran, one Guatemalan, and one Honduran—and three women, all Mexican nationals, for working illegally in the United States.

News of the raid and arrests made national headlines because it was the first raid after President Barack Obama took office. Throughout the campaign leading up to his election Obama had pledged to crackdown on companies that hired undocumented workers while seeking to change the maze of immigration laws.

As the workers were handcuffed and led away to the Northwest Detention Center in Tacoma, Nick and Mary Mele hung on to every tidbit of news about the detentions.

The Meles are a married couple who take their Catholic faith extremely seriously. Nick retired in 1999 from the U.S. Foreign Service and Mary teaches basic computer skills in the Bellingham area.

“We weren’t naïve,” said Nick. “We were aware of the plight of immigrants—documented and undocumented—in this country and around the world.”

But this was happening so close to their home and unfolding right before their eyes on local television news. The Meles just couldn’t comprehend why the workers had to be treated so harshly. It was Mary who insisted that they do something and Nick quickly embraced her plan.

“My wife said we must do as Jesus would do, we must make a pilgrimage to the detention center,” Nick said. “She was the one who approached the Roman Catholic churches in town and got their endorsement.”

Aided by Lee Langdon, a retired employee training consultant who served as a media contact for the walkers, Nick and Mary organized the 143-mile route and solicited volunteers to join their journey. The idea behind the pilgrimage was to “eliminate ignorance around immigration,” said Langdon.

To that end, they plotted a route that required 9 or 10 miles of daily walking. Langdon said organizing the pilgrimage wasn’t hard because it followed the Yamato raid. “We were deeply offended as a community,” she said. “It wasn’t a difficult job to get people involved.”

The idea behind the pilgrimage was to eliminate ignorance around immigration.



Pilgrims organize for prayer outside a detention center in Bellingham, WA.

The pilgrimage began on August 1 at Bellingham’s Church of the Assumption with about 30 people walking on the first three-mile leg to a Sacred Heart church. During the next two weeks approximately 500 people from more than 20 Catholic parishes and several other religious denominations took part as walkers or supporters.

At the end of most days, a church sanctuary served as the walkers’ home on the road, offering a meal and a congregation to hear the pilgrims discuss the need for federal immigration reform.

“We wanted to walk from church to church,” said Nick. “Churches became a place for us to spend the night and it provided an occasion to talk to people and to awaken their sense of justice. We were never turned away from any of the churches along our route.”

The journey ended August 15 with a prayer vigil at the detention center. About 90 people took part as the final group of walkers carried white crosses and prayed in front of the facility. They prayed in English and in Spanish for the detainees, the detainees’ family members, and the workers at the detention center. As their voices filled the air security guards at the center snapped pictures of the praying pilgrims.

Nick Mele said the biggest shock of the journey was the media attention from ethnic news outlets. He wrote in a report to his church after the pilgrimage that “the enthusiasm of the Spanish-language media for the pilgrimage surprised us, especially since only two English-language news organizations, the Stanwood local paper and the Pacifica News Network, a progressive radio syndicate, covered the walk. In contrast, a number of Spanish-language radio programs and newspapers and the Seattle Univision television channel interview us and followed our progress throughout the pilgrimage, as did a reporter from *The Northwest Catholic Progress*.”

A large group of marchers make their way on a 143-mile trek to protest the detention of undocumented workers.



Since returning home from their long walk Nick and Mary have become sought-after speakers on immigration at churches, schools, and government agencies in their community.

“This was a personal matter of our faith made public,” said Nick. “I believe that saying we believe in God isn’t enough to live a God-like life. We have an obligation to live life as Jesus would have lived it and to bring about social change in society.”

Recipes with Refugees

As a caseworker with the nonprofit Church World Service in Lancaster, PA, Cathy Haynes’ job is to resettle refugees and immigrants in their new homes. In most situations the newcomers arrive with little more than the clothes they’re wearing. So once they’ve been assigned shelter in a temporary apartment, Haynes knocks on the door with a few necessities, including pots, pans, and dishes.

Haynes is typically struck by the savory aromas of cooking food when she checks in to see how her charges are faring a few days or a week later. “Every time I went into these apartments, I smelled these incredible dishes,” Haynes said. “I always came away wondering what it was they were cooking because it was nothing like anything I’d known.”

The opportunity to learn about those exotic-smelling dishes presented itself when one of the refugees from Iraq prepared a “thank you” meal for some of the volunteers with Church World Service.

There was chicken in the pot. Rice, too. She noticed raisins and tasted almonds. Some of the spices seemed common enough. But the meal came together in a delicious way that was unlike anything like Haynes ever tasted or known. That’s when the “ah ha” moment struck her.

“I saw right then what a great bridge food was and how it’s a great metaphor for people,” Haynes said in an interview. “At first glance the food looked different and was intimidating. But when everyone tasted it, they noticed it was just rice and chicken and raisins. It was just put together in a different way.

“And that’s how people from other countries are,” she continued. “They might seem different or intimidating, but if you get to know them you see that they’re just the same, maybe just put together differently.”



Chef Zina Alkubaisy and Pastor Marion Haynes-Weller serve Birayti to class participants.

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Haynes decided to put that newfound awareness to the test. When her boss suggested she plan an educational activity for her clients, she knew exactly what to do—host a cooking class.

But this would be a class unlike any other. She asked Zina Alkubaisy, who had relocated a month earlier to Lancaster, to prepare a meal and to lead a discussion on food preparation in her homeland. Alkubaisy, who speaks flawless English, had assisted U.S. troops in her native Iraq and was forced to flee with her husband, fearing retribution by villagers who targeted her family.

“Once she arrived here, I put her to work with the cooking class,” Haynes said. “She was the perfect person to help educate people, recruit volunteers, and solicit donations by telling her story. Once people become educated, then they’re more willing to vote and become politically active on behalf of immigration reform.”

Haynes’ class, entitled “Recipes with Refugees,” sought to use food as a bridge to understanding another person’s culture. If you understand a person and their food, you can’t help but appreciate them, Haynes reasoned.

The idea worked to perfection. What began as a small dinner of a dozen or so people grew into a larger event that required Haynes to turn away some 50 more people. The event was so popular, word of the class spread across Pennsylvania, prompting a call from a colleague in Harrisburg to bring the cooking demonstration and discussion to an audience in the state’s capital.

“Yeah, we’re taking it on the road,” Haynes said of the event still in the planning stage at the time of this writing.

“This kind of thing is a great springboard for people to talk and get to know one another,” Haynes said. “It opened up a lot of dialogue and allowed for the larger community to be less frightened of the refugees who were resettling here.”

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Zina demonstrates how to make Biryani.

Broadview Detention Center prayer vigils

In December 2006 immigration lawyer Royal Berg began going to the Broadview Immigration Detention Center near Chicago—the last stop before deportation—to pray for the immigrants awaiting imminent expulsion from the United States. Sister JoAnn Persch heard about Berg’s trips as part of an education committee for the Archdiocese of Chicago and she wanted to join his mercy vigils.

The time finally arrived one bitter day last January, when Sister JoAnn and her colleague

Sister Pat Murphy followed Berg to the center. “I think it was the coldest day we’d ever had,” Sister JoAnn recalled. “It’s an industrial area so it’s very open. Another sister said to us, ‘Oh I can’t believe you’re going!’”

Sisters JoAnn and Pat belong to the order of Sisters of Mercy of the Americas. Both have a long history of activism on issues related to Central American immigrants and refugees. During the 1980s they were part of a group of nuns in Chicago who started a public sanctuary called Su Casa that assisted tortured Central American refugees seeking asylum.

But “the sisters,” as they have come to be known, did not anticipate that the cold winter day was the start of a larger movement. They merely acted on their faith, praying at the edge of the detention center. That simple act captured the imaginations of many others.

In addition to their work at Broadview, the sisters visited the detainees at McHenry County Jail outside Chicago. They were told by families that the people inside lacked human comfort and received virtually no support from the outside world. As part of their ministry the sisters asked the jail administrators to enter, but they were rebuffed.

That didn’t stop them, however. Working alongside the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, an array of faith and community leaders, and with state legislators, the sisters successfully pushed for and received unanimous support in the state legislature for the Access to Religious Ministry Act. The law requires that “any county jail holding immigration detainees will be required to provide reasonable access to religious workers.” So now, twice every month, the sisters set up ministry service in the McHenry County Jail library.

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Their work continues outside of the jails. They have recruited and trained over 70 clergy from Muslim, Lutheran, United Church of Christ, Baptist, Catholic, Jewish, Presbyterian, and Evangelical congregations. In addition, they frequently call the families of the detainees they encounter. “Sometimes,” says Sister JoAnn, “[the families] have no idea where missing family members are, that they’re in jail, or that they were picked up.”

Sister Mary and JoAnn continue to advocate for the rights of immigrants and detainees. In addition, they’ve established a “courtwatch” system and are working with an interfaith team to persuade officials to grant them greater access to pray with detainees. In fact, they won a major concession from federal authorities to allow three religious workers onto the buses to pray and “give [the detainees] our thoughts for their deportation journey.”

And they continue to push for Ricardo Wong, director of detention and removal operations in Chicago’s office of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, to allow them to enter the Broadview Detention Center to pray with the immigrants before they are shipped out of the country.

Perhaps best of all, Sisters JoAnn and Mary have inspired copycats in other cities. Every Wednesday morning at 7 a.m. Sister Karen Donahue brings a small group to the Dickerson Detention Center in Hamtramck, MI, just outside of Detroit. In the past year and a half they have only missed one day—a day in which the wind chill dropped to 15 below zero—and they have organized meetings with members of their congressional delegation.

But the keystone of the sisters’ advocacy remains the regular three and a half hour trek to Springfield to lobby state lawmakers for broader immigration reform. “We’re two old ladies but we’re going to keep at this as long as we can,” said Sister JoAnn. “This is the Gospel call: to welcome the stranger, to walk justly, to feed the hungry, to deal with the oppressed.”

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Sisters Pat Murphy (L) and JoAnn Persch speak at vigil in support of immigrant rights.

Conclusion

Few people dispute the need for immigration reform. The current system is an untenable mishmash of procedures, prohibitions, and penalties that are at odds with our national interests and history. What's more, heavy-handed punishments seem to be the only national policy on immigration.

While faithful Americans have been drowned out in recent debates over immigration reform by a cacophony of critics and naysayers dominating the media discussion, their voices were never silenced.

Indeed, as Congress has failed repeatedly during the past decade to fix the problem, faithful and progressive Americans have raised their voices ever louder. Alarmed by the treatment of fellow human beings in their own communities, they have moved to direct political action.

Faithful and progressive Americans are engaged in an impressive variety of service, prayer, and advocacy. They are organizing potluck dinners, speaker series, town hall rallies, congressional letter-writing campaigns, lobby efforts, and more to change national immigration policy from the grassroots upward.

The Center for American Progress applauds their work and shares their ultimate objective—comprehensive immigration reform. We urge leaders to act in the interest of the nation by pursuing policies that resolve the status of undocumented immigrants, reduce family backlogs, enhance legal immigration channels and labor mobility while protecting American workers, fostering an inclusive American identity, and employing effective enforcement policies and safeguards. All responsible leaders know that the status quo is unacceptable and that it is in our nation's economic interest to ensure that our laws encourage immigrants to be in the system rather than operate outside the system. To that end our policies should require undocumented immigrants to come forward to register, pay taxes, learn English, and receive legal status.



Equally importantly, however, there is a moral imperative to revamping our broken immigration system, as the community faith leaders interviewed for this report make clear. The insight of the faith community is brilliantly simple: America's communities are at their strongest when their weakest members are embraced, supported, and welcomed as neighbors. Our current policies permit 12 million people to live in the shadows, to live in fear of losing their families, and to live without hope of ever belonging to a nation that they want to call their own. Their hard work makes the country stronger, but their uncertain status makes them prey for exploitation and weakens our standing as a just nation.

This isn't the way Americans should treat the strangers that dwell among us.

About the author

Sam Fulwood III, a Senior Fellow at American Progress, analyzes the influence of national politics and domestic policies on communities of color across the United States.

Prior to joining the Center, Fulwood was a metro columnist at *The Plain Dealer* in Cleveland, Ohio. During the 1990s, he was a national correspondent in the Washington bureau of *Los Angeles Times*, where he created a national race-relations beat and contributed to the paper's Pulitzer Prize-winning coverage of the Los Angeles riots in 1992.

Fulwood is the author of two books, *Waking from the Dream: My Life in the Black Middle Class* (Anchor, 1996) and *Full of It: Strong Words and Fresh Thinking for Cleveland* (Gray & Company, 2004). He is a founding contributing writer for The Root.com, an online publication targeted to the African-American online community.

He was a 1994 Nieman Foundation fellow and is currently a member of the foundation's board of advisors. During the spring of 2000, he was an Institute of Politics fellow at Harvard University. Fulwood was an inaugural presidential fellow at Case Western Reserve University in 2003, where he taught courses on media, politics, and pop culture.

Fulwood earned a B.A. in journalism from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1978.

Endnotes

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- 3 Roger Mahony, "Called by God to Help," *The New York Times*, March 22, 2006, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/22/opinion/22mahony.html>. See also: John Pomfret, "Cardinal Puts Church in Fight for Immigration Rights," *The Washington Post*, April 2, 2006, available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/04/01/AR2006040101206.html>.
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- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 Sue Fishkoff, "Jewish activists rally in Postville to support Agriprocessors workers," July 28, 2008, available at http://www.jewishchronicle.org/article.php?article_id=10397.
- 7 "Progress by Pesach," available at <http://www.jewishcommunityaction.org/organize/progressbypesach.htm>.
- 8 The Pew Hispanic Center estimates that North Carolina had about 350,000 undocumented residents in 2008.

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