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“When people are pulled from their community and sent to war, the community should help own the suffering they bring back with them. That kind of pain is not meant to be borne alone. Veterans can’t make sense of it alone. They need others to come alongside them, to listen to their stories, to help hold their pain so they can deal with it.”

—NATHAN GRAESER [MDIV '12]



RESTORING BELONGING AMONG “THE LEAST OF THESE”

THE VOICE OF THE CHURCH IN A TIME OF HEIGHTENED IMMIGRATION ENFORCEMENT

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Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these. (Matt 19:14)

I was a stranger and you invited me in. (Matt 25:35)

There are few social issues in America that pose the kind of challenge to our concept of belonging that the issue of immigration does. We are a nation founded by immigrants and many of us take pride in being a nation of such rich diversity. However, we are perplexed by the complex issues that surround immigration, particularly as it pertains to undocumented migration. At the heart of this web of concerns, the impact of undocumented status, deportation, and the persistent threat of deportation on the children of immigrants has stirred much interest in the domains of mental health, social services, and social policy. Foundations of health—spiritual, physical, cognitive, and emotional—are established during childhood. A multidisciplinary body of research documents that systems and social structures affect the development of children and the health of the family. Like race, class, and gender, legal status¹ is considered a major social determinant of health and a “societal risk factor” under which people live.

From a Christian perspective, these societal risks can be perceived as potential obstacles in the path to reaching God’s purpose, provision, and projections for each one of us. These obstacles can be present in corporate contexts, and we know that the corporate sin of social injustice negates the very *imago Dei* nature that God has bestowed upon us. The Greek word *hamartia*, or “missing the mark,” highlights our failure to live up to what God intended us to be. Theologian Stanley J. Grenz argues that “sin refers to

whatever seeks to thwart God’s plan and goal, namely, the establishment of a community.”² Social structures that cause alienation and estrangement skew God’s proposed plan for humankind to live in community and connection. As followers of Christ, we must transcend the pull of our culture and expose the ill effects of injustice that often are hidden in plain sight. Immigration enforcement in the United States, as it is structured today, is one such social structure that leaves many children at risk of “missing the mark” of reaching their full potential.

THE GRAVITY AND MAGNITUDE OF THE PROBLEM

The world is experiencing a dire humanitarian crisis. Massive numbers of displaced peoples are moving from one region of the world to another in search of safety, security, and shelter. Every continent, from Africa to Europe to the Americas, is struggling with mass migration. More often than not, we are seeing the inability of national leaders and policies to cope with this growing concern. From 2014 to today, there has been a surge in the number of family units (mothers with young children) and unaccompanied minors fleeing from violence-stricken Central American countries such as El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, and Mexico to the United States. Aggravating this crisis is the fact that nearly 12 million undocumented immigrants in the United States are caught in a vacuum of immigration reform debates marked by inaction and grave polarization. Failure to create pathways to legal residency and citizenship has paved the way for the heightened immigration enforcement of today and resulted in historic levels of deportations of Latinos, many of whom are parents of citizen children. In fact, 5.5 million children in the United States live with at least one undocumented parent, and 88 percent (4.5 million) of these children are US-born

citizens.³ In just over two years, between July 2010 and September 2012, nearly 250,000 parents of citizen children were deported, representing an annual average of about 90,000 parental deportations.⁴

Although “illegal” immigration has been with us since our nation’s creation, immigration enforcement has grown in a manner never known before. In a Migration Policy Institute report⁵ on illegal immigration and the dramatic growth of enforcement, the authors state that over the past 25 years this institution has evolved into “a complex, cross-agency system that is interconnected in an unprecedented fashion.” Fueling today’s historic level of deportations is the intersection of the criminal justice system and immigration enforcement, with the collaboration of local enforcement. For-profit companies overseeing detention and deportation centers, such as the Corrections Corporation of America and the GEO Group, add to a growing need to keep the immigration enforcement machine running. Add an “us” versus “them” rhetoric, and the problem is compounded exponentially. It is not surprising, then, to see how immigration enforcement has become a powerful force against powerless and displaced peoples.

Caught in the middle of unprecedented immigration enforcement and anti-immigrant rhetoric, many children of immigrants struggle to make meaning of their experience as US citizens. These kids are growing up with a unique sense of having what I call a *vulnerable citizenship*. Many citizen children of undocumented immigrants have a deep-seated sense of not belonging anywhere: many have never been to their parents’ countries of origin and, at the same time, because of their parents’ legal status they feel they do not fully belong in the United States. Like

their undocumented parents, these citizen children are often “living in the shadows.”

In the School of Psychology, through research funded by the Foundation for Child Development, my students and I have borne witness to the tenuous and confusing sense of belonging many children of immigrants contend with on a daily basis. Many know that their vulnerable citizenship means their parents could easily vanish at any time when immigration enforcement takes them away. A 12-year-old child in our study described her emotional dilemma and constant uncertainty, saying she often worries her parents could be deported at any time, anywhere:

If my parents are deported . . . I am afraid my parents will have to go to Honduras and they won't have a job there. They would worry a lot about me and my little sister. . . . I think I would go with my mom if she was taken by la migra . . . but I worry because I can't read or write Spanish. I've never been in Honduras.

The developmental implications of growing up under the shadows are well documented. Research shows that having an undocumented parent puts children at risk for a host of potential problems, negatively impacting children’s successful development and academic achievement over and above what one would directly attribute to the ill effects of poverty.⁶ Further, clinical research demonstrates that sudden and unexpected family separation can cause emotional trauma and psychological distress in children. So it is not surprising to learn that children of unauthorized immigrants experience higher risk for depression, anxiety, and trauma.⁷ These mental health challenges are known to rob a child, as well as society, of the intellectual capital and overall well-being of that child

+ RESTORING BELONGING

HENRI NOUWEN

Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life

In our world full of strangers, estranged from their own past, culture and country, from their neighbors, friends and family, from their deepest self and their God, we witness a painful search for a hospitable place where life can be lived without fear and where community can be found.

Although many, we might even say most, strangers in this world become easily the victims of a fearful hostility, it is possible for men and women and obligatory for Christians to offer an open and hospitable space where strangers can cast off their strangeness and become our fellow human beings. The movement from hostility to hospitality is hard and full of difficulties. Our society seems to be increasingly full of fearful, defensive, aggressive people anxiously clinging to their property and inclined to look at their surrounding world with suspicion, always expecting an enemy to suddenly appear, intrude and do harm. But still—that is our vocation: to convert the hostis into a hospes, the enemy into a guest, and to create the free and fearless space where brotherhood and sisterhood can be formed and fully experienced.

and can persist well into adulthood.

When one lives in the shadows, his or her connection to community is often disrupted. Unauthorized parents' withdrawal from social life in an effort to avoid deportation has reverberating effects on their citizen children's access to services and opportunities to thrive. Moreover, these uncertain and challenging realities often lead children of unauthorized immigrants to question their inherent dignity and worth individually, and as a society we start "missing the mark," failing to live how God intended us to live.

In times such as these, when an unprecedented number of peoples are displaced globally, how does the church respond to the immigrant and the refugee? In our own personal geographical location and missional vocation, how are we as Christians to respond toward the immigrant in a time of heightened immigration enforcement? How are we to respond in light of the Christ's words: "I was a stranger, and you invited me in?" Can the church set an example of taking strangers in and affirming they belong?

WHAT IS THE CHURCH TO DO?

How do we fight corporate sin—social injustice—as it relates to unjust laws and practices against the immigrants in our midst? Perhaps we begin with intercessory prayer, missionary proclamation, Christian activism, and compassionate hospitality. With these practices, Christians throughout the nation can join in the quest to restore and promote healing and justice for these vulnerable populations so that they may know that they have inherent worth and they belong.

Intercessory Prayer

Intercessory prayer confronts the realities of our time with grief and lament. Theologian Walter Brueggemann describes three prophetic tasks of the church—reality, grief, and hope⁸—that are very relevant to our current times. As we intentionally recognize and face the daunting realities of immigration enforcement in the United States, we can be pushed into a place of disbelief and grief. This pain and grief, once placed before God, can turn into a righteous indignation that may propel us to act: to restore a sense of belonging to our neighbors and to bring healing to our society as a whole.

Our research participants frequently told us about the life-giving spiritual accompani-

ment they experienced when they saw their family torn apart by deportation. One eight-year-old girl eloquently described this:

Most of the time I was very sad, and I did not tell my friends that my mother had been deported because I was afraid of what they will think of me and my family. I only told one friend, and she went to our home and would give us hope. She is Catholic, and she would pray for us every day.

Missionary Proclamation

Recently Pope Francis urged us, as Christians, "to build bridges and not walls." Indeed, the gospel is clear that one of our missionary tasks, as followers of Christ, is to construct bridges, to build paths, and to assemble ladders across the divides and schisms that separate us from our neighbors and God. As Christians, our words, deeds, and actions ought to proclaim that our "God is our fortress and our refuge." Therefore, we do not need to build walls around us.

Christian Activism

Christian activism takes many shapes and forms. Theologically grounded sanctuary initiatives as well as simple, daily choices one makes regarding this overwhelming issue are all avenues of Christian activism. One of my students reported that, after feeling convicted about corruption in for-profit incarceration/deportation centers, she chose to withdraw her investments from accounts that supported some of the for-profit companies running immigration detention centers. Educating members of the church about injustices in our system of laws and foreign policies is another way to practice Christian activism. The possibilities for action are many.

Hospitality

How can the church reclaim the biblical meaning of hospitality in its quest to restore a sense of identity and belonging to the least of these—and particularly to those who may not be able to pay us back now, or ever?

The church must apply and exercise its missionary function toward the immigrant among us with intentionality and responsibility. Through our research efforts with families affected by immigration enforcement, we were able to appreciate up close the convening power of the church. Many of our participants living in the shadows would willingly meet us in churches, where they felt safe and accepted regardless of their im-

migration status. We had Catholic families being interviewed in Pentecostal churches, and charismatic folks willing to be embraced by Christians they otherwise deemed to be in theological and ideological opposition to them. Overall, fear and denominational barriers were neutralized when a clear message of acceptance and respect for the divine in these vulnerable families was expressed.

COMPASSION AND THE NURTURING OF A GOD-CENTERED IDENTITY

In this broken world we encounter pain and suffering as part of our human condition, but God designed in us the capacity to transcend our suffering. Resilience is an essential yet ordinary power that promotes growth in the midst of stress and adversity. Many children of unauthorized immigrants thrive in the midst of the adverse conditions I have described. However, it is also clear that their life circumstances present challenges that too often undermine their overall well-being and potential. Emerging developmental research highlights what communities of faith have known for a long time: all of us are wired for community and connection. The communal power of the church must be mobilized to help buffer the ill effects of forced family separation. Research shows that children develop a positive sense of who they are, and feel valued and respected, when embraced by at least one stable and committed relationship with a supportive parent, caregiver, or another adult. It is in these caring relationships and safe communities that resilience is built over time. Communities of faith were designed to do this best.

Whether in the therapeutic or pastoral or discipleship relationship, we are all called to restore hope and to foster and honor a God-centered identity in everyone, and particularly with "the least of these." At Fuller, we train not only future pastors and church leaders but marriage and family therapists and clinical psychologists whose faith guides their clinical practices and outreach. Our coming alongside the least of these affirms that God is present in human history, even in its most tragic episodes. In the end, regardless of educational background or title, we are all responsible for embracing the immigrant in our midst as members of the body of Christ. This form of accompaniment is at the center of the gospel.

For those in communities of faith, the biblical mandate to care for the stranger and the moral urgency of immigration reform

may be enough to move us into action. For others, the enormous economic costs to our society may be a more compelling argument. Many activists today are responding to this urgency out of social compassion, political conviction, and diverse social ideologies. Whatever your reasons and wherever you stand on the issue of immigration enforcement, the stakes are high for the next generation of US Americans, and we must act: both individually and corporately as the body of Christ.



ENDNOTES

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