



A Message to the Covenanting Faith Bodies of Rural & Migrant Ministry Concerning Immigration Reform

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Rural & Migrant Ministry, a multi-faith organization, has been blessed to work with countless immigrants from many different countries throughout our twenty-five years. Recently there has been a great deal of discussion concerning immigration reform. As the faith community engages in this discussion, we would like to offer the following observations.

First, as the country engages in public policy discussions about immigrants, it is essential to keep in mind that we are talking about human beings - men and women who yearn for what any of us yearns for: a safe and decent life; to be respected, to have opportunities; and to see their children thrive. They are no different than the generations before them: they are hard working people who are committed to their families and to this society. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, we are reminded constantly about respect and love for our neighbor. We are also reminded to welcome foreigners, regardless of their legal status. Many immigrants live in fear and isolation, not to mention poverty. They are seen as faceless non-humans, as numbers, and too many in our society are willing to justify abusive and unjust treatment of immigrants because "they are illegal aliens". When we can see first the humanity of our fellow humans, and when we reach out to them and allow them to reach out to us, then we can begin to create structures and policies that are humane and just.

The second concern, is that our public discussion around immigration reform often begins, not in humanity, but in the realm of economics. In the United States, we talk of how to obtain cheap labor first, rather than how to create a just system that offers a living wage and decent working conditions. There is often talk about "those people taking away our jobs" but is this really the case? For example, how many of us would choose the life of the duck workers in Sullivan County, who work three shifts a day for thirty days, with rarely more than four/five hours off between any of the shifts? Throughout many industries there are numerous jobs that domestic workers are not willing to take. And frankly, there are many employers who are not willing to hire domestic workers because these workers wouldn't put up with the abuses. Time and time again, agribusiness says that they can't find labor and there is a desperate need for an enhanced "guest worker program", but what if they paid decent wages and offered better working conditions? The reality is that farmworking is consistently ranked as one of the most dangerous occupations. Other positions filled by immigrants are dangerous as well, for example: lawn-care workers who regularly work with dangerous pesticides, or demolition crews who remove asbestos. As people of faith, we question whether we are called to justify a market system that thirsts for and thrives upon cheap labor at the cost of human rights.

We also wonder why there is no discussion in many of these immigration reform proposals about allowing immigrant "guest workers" to work toward permanent



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residency. Our country's failure to offer this opportunity guarantees that we will maintain an economic system that uses people as machines, rather than sees them as fellow human beings.

There can be no justification within our faith communities for supporting this type of indentured servitude in which we thrive on the backs of others through a sanctioned two-class system. Another disturbing aspect of the guest worker proposals is that they seek to deny workers legal recourse when they have been cheated within United States labor system. It is well known that many employers already intentionally hire vulnerable undocumented workers and then threaten them when they dare to demand what legal rights (or pay) they are entitled. If guest workers have no legal recourse, then they too will be vulnerable. Our laws and structures have historically been created and maintained to ensure a cheap, fearful, and docile labor force. Again, we need to look no further than the laws in New York State that exclude farmworkers from the right to a day of rest and overtime pay since the 1930's.

Some of the public discussion has centered around security or, more specifically, fear. Many of us who are a part of Rural & Migrant Ministry have found more security in our lives when we have been in relationship with others. The more we work to overcome our fears and ignorance and get to know "strangers", the greater our security grows. It boggles our mind that some of these proposals are held up in the name of security. What does denying guest workers the right to apply for permanent residency status have to do with security? If there were a security issue, then why allow them into the country to work as guest workers? Again, we can't help but wonder at the Ministry if many of these proposals are rooted in fear and the desire for cheap, controlled labor.

We urge our brothers and sisters in the faith community to keep the humanity of men, women, and children front and center. We need discourse and action that begin not with "the immigrant problem" but rather what to do with a "system problem" that exploits people. Let us not succumb to the pressures that call for the creation of a system that places cheap and controlled labor as its centerpiece. Rather, let us work to ensure the well-being, rights, and dignity of those who work among us, by focusing upon the creation of an economic system that is just and pays a living wage. Such a system honors the humanity of each of us. As people of faith, this is our call, our hope, our opportunity.