

Faith and Life REFLECTIONS

March 2007

**“Broken Realities:
A look at facts about
immigration in the U.S.”**

Faith and Life Reflections is a monthly resource for lay and rostered leaders on headlines, current books, movies, social and ethical issues such as those involving natural disasters and developments in the church. Comments may be returned to the writer or to the editor, Mark A. Staples (Mstaples@Ltsp.edu, director of the Faith and Life Institute at LTSP).

This month's reflection is written by Ralston H. Deffenbaugh, Jr., president of Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS). Ralie Deffenbaugh has worked with Lutheran organizations concerned with international affairs since 1981 and was the first chair of The Refugee Council USA. A human rights lawyer, Deffenbaugh has written extensively on the legal, moral and political aspects of resettlement.

Focus: America—A Nation of Immigrants

The United States of America was founded and built by immigrants and throughout our nation's history, our culture and values have been shaped by those who have reached our shores.

An Introduction: Our Christian Tradition

In the Old Testament we read the story of a refugee people. In the New Testament, we see the story of a refugee family. In our Reformation history, we see the story of Reformer Martin Luther being given refuge at Wartburg. And after World War II, one out of every six Lutherans in the world was a refugee or displaced person.

Our Christian tradition recounts the migrant experience we have had as God's people and emphasizes that we should show empathy, compassion and welcome to newcomers in our midst (Exodus 23; Matthew 25). Because of our experience of being loved and our tradition of being welcomed, our basic approach to migrating people is to open our hearts and welcome the newcomers.

In virtually all cases, people who migrate to the United States come for reasons of family, work or freedom—to unite with loved ones, to find employment or to seek refuge from persecution. Most people would judge the newcomers' motivation for migrating and their actions in the United States as good acts that contribute to the common good.

While most Americans would question the appropriateness of unlawful entry, their judgment should be tem-

pered by at least two realities. First, necessity is often driving the migration—people are fleeing persecution or abject poverty or the prospect of a living for years and years without family. Second, the immigration system is so broken that there is often no viable way to migrate legally.

A Broken Immigration System

Unlike our ancestors, today's immigrants encounter a broken immigration system that separates families, neglects human rights and forces desperate people to live in the shadows.

While U.S. immigration policy was established to foster family unity, to help meet the labor needs of our economy and to protect refugees, following are a few facts that highlight the state of our broken immigration system:

- Our current system does not keep families together. Even for those able to migrate legally, it can take up to 10 years or more for refugees or legal permanent residents to bring their families. The current backlog on processing petitions is huge, as is the number of new applications, while only a small number of family visas are awarded each year. Many of the undocumented are the spouses, parents, siblings and children of U.S. citizens and legal residents who can not afford to wait for an indefinite number of years to be reunited with their loved ones.
- Our current system does not meet community economic needs. In many vital sectors of the

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economy— agriculture, construction and hospitality—immigrant workers are needed to meet vital community needs, yet virtually no employment visas are allotted. Many U.S. employers need foreign workers to fill jobs yet our government's lack of responsible regulation encourages the exploitation of hardworking migrants.

Four Essential Principles for Immigration Reform

As a nation of immigrants, we feel called to a more compassionate and rational system. As a nation of laws, we long for laws that spring from community values and help fulfill community needs. As Christians, we pray that our legislators will create a system that will respect the dignity of all God's children and one that will allow us to better fulfill Jesus' mandate to "welcome the stranger."

To meet the needs of migrants and of America, meaningful reform must create a just, fair immigration system that:

- unites families;
- protects human rights and worker rights;
- ends the marginalization of the undocumented, making it possible for those working "below the radar" to live freely and openly in our society; and
- gives law-abiding immigrants willing to contribute to our economy and society a path toward citizenship.

Questions to ponder and discuss

What does the Bible reveal to us about God's attitude toward the alien?

Who in your life was an immigrant to the United States? Under what circumstances did they come to this country?

What programs or activities does your church or community offer to "welcome the stranger?"

How might your congregation speak and act on behalf

of vulnerable immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers?

About Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service

Since 1939 Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS) has worked through a national network of service and advocacy partners to resettle refugees, protect immigrant children, advocate for fair treatment of asylum seekers, pursue alternatives for those in immigration detention, and promote welcoming communities throughout the country.



LIRS is a cooperative agency of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod and the Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. With initiative and stewardship, LIRS seeks creative solutions for uprooted people regardless of race, ethnicity or religious beliefs. To learn about immigration issues or to find out more about LIRS, please visit www.lirs.org.

Resources for further reflection (please note that Web links may change):

Backgrounder on Comprehensive Immigration Reform, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, November 2006.

<http://www.lirs.org/DonateServe/advocate/CIR/CIRBackgrounder.doc>

"Evangelical Lutherans Call for Fair and Just Immigration Reform," Joint ELCA-LIRS Statement on Immigration, March 2006.

<http://www.lirs.org/DonateServe/advocate/CIR/ELCA-LIRSStatement.pdf>

"A Message on Immigration," Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Department for Studies, Division for Church in Society, November 1998.

<http://www.elca.org/socialstatements/immigration/>

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