

We must join the immigration dialogue

by Katharine Jefferts Schori

Most Episcopalians are aware of, and probably invested in, the current public debates about immigration in the United States. The 15 other nations represented in the Episcopal Church also are engaged in similar debates and struggles over the same issues of national security, economic and political refugees and the relative priorities of citizens and immigrants.

Our biblical tradition speaks loudly and prophetically about God's intent for a healed society in which distinctions based on nationality or ethnicity are transcended. The Hebrew Bible speaks more often (38 times) and more vociferously about welcome for the alien and the sojourner (the non-Jew who resides in or travels through Israel) than any other topic of identity: "Remember that you were slaves in Egypt ... do not oppress the aliens in your midst" (Deuteronomy 24:18-22).

The great prophetic vision of Zion is as a light to the nations, where all will worship God and do justice together (Isaiah 42:6-7; Isaiah 60:3), where people from every language, family and nation gather before the throne of God to build a city of peace and justice (Revelation 5:9-10; 21:22-26). That overarching dream of differing peoples gathered to worship and build a just society also underlies the founding vision of the United States. Those American forebears claimed that vision of a "city built on a hill" to which the nations shall stream.

The Episcopal Church long has claimed a particular place in seeking to build those divine visions into reality through engagement with our political, economic and social structures – and not only in the United States. That engagement with society is a central aspect of the Episcopal Church's mission in every part of the world in which it exists — those like Honduras and Haiti, which still are part of this church, and those like Liberia and the Philippines, now in other provinces of the Anglican Communion. We believe that our faith has something essential to do with how we engage major social issues, and immigration is a central one at present.

Attitudes and political approaches to migration in the United States and across the globe have changed in the last decade both because of increased fears about terrorism and national security and because of the ongoing economic crisis. Both realities have engendered responses that turn inward to focus on personal security, both physical and economic.

Those fears are powerful forces, and they are understandable, even if they are not always wholly rational. Uncontrolled migration across the U.S. - Mexico border, for instance, actually has decreased by two-thirds over the last decade, and the total number of undocumented immigrants in the United States has declined about 10 percent. Violent crime in the border states has decreased significantly

over the same time period. Yet most American citizens still believe that more people are coming and that violence continues to increase. Those fears, whether substantiated by declining employment opportunities or baseless prejudice, are contributing to increased tribalism across the globe.

Tribalism is the belief that our group is the only "good" one and that "we" must protect ourselves from all "others" who are really out to destroy us. That attitude is fundamentally un-Christian, for it denies that the "other" really bears the image of God.

At the same time, that kind of attitude has emerged repeatedly in the United States and elsewhere as the local people are threatened by changes represented by newly arriving groups.

Immigrants to the United States from Ireland, Spain, the Basque country, Italy, Poland and many other places have experienced that kind of xenophobic response in recent centuries. That sort of response is not terribly far from racism, which forced-immigrants from Africa and their descendants continue to experience, and which in an ironic reversal continues to shape Anglo responses to Native Americans.

Human beings have packed up and moved for millennia, in search of food, shelter, safety, better climate, economic opportunity and freedom. The presenting issue in the United States centers on American labor needs and economic need in Mexico and other Latin American countries. The American economic system depends on labor that is not being provided by citizens. Mexican citizens seek to fill that labor need in order to answer their economic need. We currently do not have legal structures that permit an adequate and appropriate flow of labor to satisfy those mutual needs.

Americans benefit from the current system, which encourages "illegal" migration, primarily in the form of low-cost food. Americans also benefit from a larger international system that privileges domestic crop production through subsidies and penalizes food production in other nations through import duties. We cannot separate the immigration issue from the economic systems in which we all participate and from which only some profit.

We all agree that American immigration law is broken. Just and appropriate responses can be shaped in public conversations in which people of faith do and must have a voice. As you engage in that civic discourse, I would encourage you to learn more about the underlying issues and then gather with others in your congregation and in the larger community to reflect on a number of questions:

- What values do I as a Christian hold about the dignity of every human person?
- Should immigrants be treated differently from citizens and, if so, how and why?
- What values do I believe this nation should hold up as central?
- What are my own fears in the midst of this current debate?
- What is my prayer?

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