



## **A House Divided:** Why Americans of Faith are Concerned About Undocumented Immigrants [www.sojo.net/immigration](http://www.sojo.net/immigration)

The immigration debate has not only become heated; it has become divisive and hate-filled to a degree that undermines Christian and civic values. It has been hijacked by organizations with ideological, operational and financial ties to white-supremacist hate groups akin to the Ku Klux Klan and neo-Nazi movements. Still, these groups have been branded as mainstream and are given credence as “experts” by the media, who gives them extensive coverage. Furthermore, while national efforts to pass comprehensive immigration reform failed, stepped up enforcement initiatives, including new state and local ordinances and immigration raids, are dividing communities and tearing families apart. Enforcement of our immigration laws is critical, but it must come as part of a holistic strategy that respects the dignity of our immigrant communities.

The fallout of the legislative stalemate is alarming and demands the attention of faithful Americans who have a clear moral imperative: “I was a stranger, and you welcomed me” (Matthew 25:35). Christians have a responsibility to bring our core values of love, mercy and justice back into the debate, to unite our communities, to bridge deepening divides, and to be a source of healing and reconciliation. Following is a summary of a November 2007 report on this issue from Christians for Comprehensive Immigration Reform entitled “A House Divided: Why Americans of Faith are Concerned about Undocumented Immigrants.”

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### **“Mainstream” Immigration Opponents? A Closer Look at the Anti-Immigration Movement**

A healthy debate over immigration is needed, but the anti-immigration movement is dominated by hate groups, many with ties to white supremacist movements. Unfortunately, the mainstream media regularly fails to identify the true nature of these organizations, and gives them repeated opportunities to demagogue the issue. Repeated use of such hateful language has pushed the debate far from the center.

Just how hateful is this movement? Consider some quotes from mainstream anti-immigration opinion leaders:

- “[Undocumented immigrants] have no problem slitting your throat and taking your money or selling drugs to your kids or raping your daughters, and they are evil people.” – Chris Simcox, co-founder of the Minuteman Project and president of the Minuteman Civil Defense Corps<sup>i</sup>
- “Mexican men have a reputation for leering and worse at little girls, which shouldn’t surprise us, since sex with children is socially acceptable in Mexico.” – Brenda Walker, publisher<sup>ii</sup>
- “What we’ll do is randomly pick one night every week where we will kill whoever crosses the border ... step over there and you die. You get to decide whether it’s your lucky night or not. I think that would be more fun.” – Brian James, Tennessee radio talk show host<sup>iii</sup>

### **“Love Your Neighbor as Yourself:” The Harm of Punitive State and Local Immigration Policies**

Due in large part to the efforts of the groups described above, attempts to pass bipartisan comprehensive immigration reform in Congress failed. Unfortunately, efforts at the state and local levels to persecute and expel undocumented immigrants are succeeding, at the same time that they confuse and alienate all immigrants, and the Latino community in particular.

According to the National Conference of State Legislatures: “As of April 13, 2007, state legislators in all of the 50 states had introduced at least 1,169 bills and resolutions related to immigration or immigrants or

refugees. This is more than twice the number of introduced bills (570) in 2006.”<sup>iv</sup> The vast majority were punitive in nature.

- Due to increasing tensions in Prince William County, Va., and efforts by county supervisors to crack down on undocumented immigrants, Latinos in the county, including both “illegal immigrants and the many legal immigrant relatives and friends who live with them, have been moving out of Prince William ever since July, when county supervisors first approved the plan’s outline.” The scene surrounding the vote may have been almost as disturbing as the vote itself. The *Post* reported that, “[m]ore than 1,200 people packed the county government complex in Woodbridge and the streets outside yesterday afternoon, creating a charged—and at times tense—atmosphere.”<sup>xxiv</sup>
- Recently passed in Oklahoma, House Bill 1804 criminalizes the acts of harboring or even transporting undocumented immigrants in the state. A local Roman Catholic archbishop called the bill “unjust” and likened it to antebellum laws that criminalized the harboring of slaves, adding that it would keep churches and clergy from ministering to the needs of undocumented immigrants and their families.<sup>v</sup>

### **Reckless Enforcement-only Approach Disrupts Family Unity, Human Dignity**

The U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, the National Council of La Raza, and the Urban Institute all agree – “work-site enforcement actions,” or “raids,” have been increasing<sup>vi</sup> and have “resulted in large-scale sweeping operations in many states.”<sup>vii</sup> More and more, a reckless enforcement-only approach to immigration is ripping communities and families apart, and victimizing children, most of whom are U.S. citizens. In such a charged environment, not even Americans are safe if they look or sound like immigrants.

- During a series of raids in Colorado, hundreds of children were separated from their parents for days, left to wonder when they would be reunited and who would care for them.<sup>viii</sup>
- Immigration agencies sought to deport a man who had lived in the U.S. for 18 years. Because he had escaped a Vietnamese “re-education” camp, he could not be deported back to his home country. He and 324,000 others like him are stuck in limbo – ordered deported but with no country to which they can safely go.

### **Call to Action: Remaining True to Our Christian and Civic Values of Compassion, Mercy, Justice**

In response to these messages of fear and xenophobia, the Christian message is clear: we must demonstrate love and compassion for our neighbors. Already, the Catholic Church, United Methodist Church, Mennonite Church USA, Presbyterian Church (USA) and numerous religious organizations are taking action on the grassroots level to resist the aggressive targeting of immigrants. Together, they are:

- Forming a speakers’ bureau of religious leaders around the country to respond to instances of intolerance with a strong moral voice;
- Equipping churches and clergy with scriptural grounding and educational materials to build bridges and open hearts and minds in their communities; and
- Mobilizing congregations to oppose punitive laws that fail to take a comprehensive and humane approach toward immigration.

While the climate appears to be shifting towards intolerance, Christians have the ability and responsibility to push back. Indeed, Christians – as well as those of other faiths – are taking action to do so. Whether they are American citizens or immigrants, undocumented or documented, all will benefit from dismissing divisive rhetoric and beginning a new conversation on immigration that acknowledges the dignity of all people living in our country, and recognizes the integral role of immigrants in our history, our economy our faith communities and our culture.

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<sup>i</sup> Holthouse, David, “Arizona Showdown: High-powered firearms, militia maneuvers and racism at the Minuteman Project,” Southern Poverty Law Center’s Intelligence Report, Summer 2005. Available online at <http://www.splcenter.org/intel/intelreport/article.jsp?pid=915>

<sup>ii</sup> Walker, Brenda, “Top Ten Reasons Why the US Should Not Marry Mexico,” VDARE January 1, 2007. Available online at [http://www.vdare.com/walker/070117\\_top\\_ten.htm](http://www.vdare.com/walker/070117_top_ten.htm)

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<sup>iii</sup> “TN Talkshow Host Calls For Shooting of Immigrants,” Available online at [http://www.buildingdemocracy.org/Anti-Immigrant\\_Activity/Tennessee/TN\\_Talkshow\\_Host\\_Calls\\_For\\_Shooting\\_of\\_Immigrants\\_20060428681/](http://www.buildingdemocracy.org/Anti-Immigrant_Activity/Tennessee/TN_Talkshow_Host_Calls_For_Shooting_of_Immigrants_20060428681/)

<sup>iv</sup> National Conference of State Legislatures, “Overview of State Legislation Related to Immigration and Immigrants in 2007,” April 18, 2007. Available online at <http://www.ncsl.org/programs/immig/2007StateLegislationImmigration.htm>

<sup>v</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vi</sup> See, e.g., Julie L. Myers, Department of Homeland Security Assistant Secretary for Immigration and Customs Enforcement, “No More Slaps on Wrist for Work-Site Violations,” *Kansas City Star*, June 26, 2007. Available online at <http://www.ice.gov/doclib/pi/news/testimonies/070626KCStarOpEd.pdf>

<sup>vii</sup> Capps, Randy et al, “Paying the Price: The Impact of Immigration Raids on America’s Children,” NCLR and The Urban Institute. Available online at <http://www.nclr.org/content/publications/download/49166>

<sup>viii</sup> Capps, Randy et al, “Paying the Price: The Impact of Immigration Raids on America’s Children,” NCLR and The Urban Institute. Available online at <http://www.nclr.org/content/publications/download/49166>