



INTERFAITH COMMUNITIES FOR DIALOGUE (ICD)

WELCOMING THE STRANGER: THE CHALLENGE OF EMBRACING IMMIGRANTS

Part 1: Immigrants in America: Benefit or Burden

In the first of our two-part series, speaker Michael Hoefler, former Director of the Office of Immigration Statistics for the Department of Homeland Security, opened with this request: *Raise your hand if you are an immigrant*. Seven people in an audience of about sixty did so. His next request: *Raise your hand if your parents are immigrants*. A few more hands went up. Mr. Hoefler's last directive: *Raise your hand if you have immigrant ancestors*. All hands shot up.

Our speaker's point was that the United States is a nation of newcomers, a country in which one out of every seven residents is an immigrant. As Mr. Hoefler explained, the U.S. comprises five percent of the world's population, but 20 percent of its immigrants. Nevertheless, our country has not always welcomed the stranger with open arms. Immigration has always been, and continues to be, a hotly debated issue that affects us all in personal ways. It is a broad and complex topic, which is why we broke it down into two parts. In part 1, Mr. Hoefler gave the audience a primer on the US immigration experience. He explored its history, demographic characteristics and evolving policies as well as key fears and misunderstandings about immigrants.

Prior to 1920, Mr. Hoefler explained, there were few limitations on immigration to the United States. From the mid 1800s to 1880, immigrants arrived almost unchecked on steamships from Northern and Western Europe. Together with immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe, they comprised the first major wave of immigration between 1880 and the early 1900s. There were still few formal restrictions on immigration at that time; those that did arise were largely based on religion (anti-Catholic) or national origin (anti-Asian) or on personal characteristics deemed undesirable. In 1920, however, Congress passed legislation establishing a national origins quota system, placing caps on immigration from each country and limiting it mainly to Europe and the Western hemisphere. Shortly thereafter, the Border Patrol was created to address illegal immigration for the first time. From the 1930s through the 1950s, immigration remained relatively low. Then the Immigration Act of 1965 eliminated the national quotas, creating instead a preference for family unification with the thought that this would achieve the same goal of maintaining the current demographic distribution. However, the elimination of quotas gave way to a steep rise in legal immigration since 1970 which has been largely composed of people from Asia and the Western hemisphere..

Mr. Hoefler also explained the major types of the roughly 48 million foreign-born residents in the United States. They are either undocumented or legal immigrants. Undocumented immigrants are those who cross the border without official papers authorizing them to reside in the United States or those who entered the U.S. legally and then overstayed their visa. Legal immigrants are those with documents who are authorized to reside in the United States, either permanently or temporarily. Legal immigrants include refugees, asylum seekers, students,

seasonal and high-tech workers, and certain children who immigrated without documents before their 16th birthday, among other groups.

In his wide-ranging talk, Mr. Hoefer stressed that, while our legal immigration system is recognized as being broken, proposals to fix it over the years have failed to receive sufficient support regardless of the political party in charge. Designed 35 years ago, it is out of step with the nature and number of immigrants today. The nature of undocumented immigration has also changed. A few decades ago, immigrants were predominantly Mexicans who crossed the border to work, remained unauthorized and under the radar, and then often returned to Mexico. It was a cycle of immigrants coming and going. This has changed to a situation in which immigrants from all over the world travel to Central America and make their way to the U.S.-Mexican border to seek asylum. The unintended consequence of the huge increase in immigration enforcement is that people who successfully enter decide they can't leave. Two thirds of our undocumented residents have lived in the United States for more than ten years.

Regarding the economic impact of immigration and the fears and misunderstandings that often cloud the immigration debate, Mr. Hoefer had these observations:

- The fiscal impacts of immigrants are generally positive at the federal level but may be negative at the state and local levels.
- Most future workforce growth will be accounted for by immigrants and their children due to the declining birthrate in the U.S.
- Immigrants are consumers who buy goods and services.
- There is little evidence that immigrants significantly affect the overall employment levels of native-born workers.
- Evidence consistently indicates that immigrants have lower crime rates than the U.S.-born population.
- Immigrant voter fraud is close to zero. There is no evidence that it impacts elections.

Following Mr. Hoefer's presentation, dialogue attendees broke into small groups of 6-8 to engage in conversation about what they'd heard. Facilitators opened the discussions by asking participants to talk about their family's immigration history and how it shaped their views on immigrants today. In addition, the small groups focused on how their faith or ethical tradition affected their views, for example, with regard to which groups of immigrants should get priority if the U.S. can't absorb all who want to come to this country.