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FEAR OF STRANGERS

Naming Fears Behind U.S. Security Policies

Strangers or Saints?

BY BETHANY SPICHER

The more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread; so the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites and worked them ruthlessly. —Exodus 1:12–13, NIV

So let's get this straight. The Egyptians dreaded the Israelites because they oppressed them? The *oppressors* feared their *slaves*? It sounds that way. And the story repeats itself.

Consider our nation's history with African slaves—whose labor made their masters wealthy—and the legacy of racism that resulted. Think of the current hardships of undocumented immigrants, upon whose work our economy depends, even as they are labeled “aliens” and “terrorists;” denied basic necessities such as housing and health care, and deprived of civil rights by labor exploitation, racial profiling and indefinite detention.

When the wealth of one population depends on the poverty of another, “strangers” are easy targets for exploitation. Those in power seek to distance themselves from the powerless, to magnify their differences and deny their commonalities, to convince themselves that the oppressed are dangerous and must be controlled.

No wonder God instructed the Israelites to treat strangers like citizens, remembering that they, too, were once strangers in Egypt (Leviticus 19:33–34). No wonder God recommended a Jubilee economy that ensured a fresh start and equal voice for everyone in the community once a generation

(Leviticus 25). Where everyone has enough, no one is oppressed or afraid. Strangers are welcomed.

The goal of this year's *Washington Memo* series is to help us name our fears and discern how they are shaping us. Too often our fear of “strangers”—those with a different name, skin color, nationality or legal status—make us compliant with our nation's campaign to fight terrorism or increase security. We forget that such “security” often comes at the expense of the oppressed in our own country, that it often looks like economic and military domination in other parts of the world, that it actually leaves us feeling more insecure than when we started.

In this *Memo*, we hear the stories of migrant farmworkers who harvest our food (pg. 6) and former prisoners who attempt to re-enter our communities (pg. 3). We read about Colombian refugees who flee persecution in the country only to find prejudice in the cities (pg. 4), and about ethnic conflicts in Africa and Mexico, where minor clashes are magnified by the powerful for their own ends (pg. 5).

Close to home and around the world—as in Egypt—strangers are oppressed and suspected. In the kingdom of God, however, we are “no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God . . . with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone” (Ephesians 2:19–20). ■

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BY J. DARYL BYLER

Welcoming strangers
can be time-consuming,
calling us to live at a pace
that offers time to turn
strangers into friends.

Hostility or Hospitality?

“Can I sleep in your house tonight?” asked Tommy, a homeless man who used to hang out in our neighborhood. Normally, Tommy slept in the boiler room at a local hospital. But this night, he was running late. The doors were locked.

I was concerned. Would Tommy do something to harm my family? He was small and fragile, but he terrified the neighborhood children with his verbal assaults and odd behaviors. After my spouse and I talked, we agreed to allow Tommy to spend the night on our family room sofa. He caused no problems and left quietly in the morning, coffee in hand. Shortly afterward, he disappeared. We have never seen him again. Looking back, I wish we had been less guarded in our hospitality.

Why do we fear strangers? Without the context of a relationship, we have no way of judging their intentions. Perhaps they will threaten or take advantage of us. Once we invited a stranger into our home for a cup of cold water. He used the occasion to scope out our house. Later, he returned as a burglar. Or perhaps we see strangers as “competition” who might take our jobs in a tight market. Or even worse, we fear that strangers might be terrorists.

Gary Percesepe, editor of *Mississippi Review*, notes that the English word for *hospitality* comes from the Latin word *hospes*, which originally meant stranger but later took on the meaning of “hostile” stranger or enemy. Hospitality, says

Percesepe, has to do with the power of a host in deciding what level of welcome, if any, to extend to a stranger.

Historically, God’s people often failed to treat strangers as God’s law required. Instead, they oppressed (Jeremiah 7:6), treated wrongly and violently (Jeremiah 22:3), extorted (Ezekiel 22:7,29), thrust aside (Malachi 3:5), rejected (Matthew 15:23) and chose not to associate with strangers (Galatians 2:11–14).

Why are we to welcome and care for strangers? Because God loves (Deuteronomy 10:18), watches over (Psalm 146:9) and identifies with (Matthew 25:35) the stranger. God’s concern for strangers is rooted in the fact that they do not possess the typical rights and privileges afforded to members of the community. They are especially vulnerable.

Welcoming strangers is risky. It requires that we truly trust God for our security. And it can be time-consuming, calling us to live at a pace that offers time to turn strangers into friends.

Today, in an age of heightened fear, there is great temptation to mistreat “strangers.” Strangers are no longer simply ignored. They are actively isolated or worse. Fences and walls are being constructed on the U.S.-Mexican border and to separate Israelis and Palestinians. Harsher immigration policies and shrinking civil liberties disproportionately impact communities of color.

In the current “war on terror” there has been much talk across the political spectrum about destroying terrorists in order to make the nation secure. There has been astonishingly little talk about learning to understand these “strangers,” to address whatever legitimate concerns they may have and to seek to turn them into friends. This would appear to be God’s plan for ensuring the security of all (Romans 5:10; Ephesians 2:11–14).

Hostility or hospitality? The choice is ours. But there is only one path to true security. ■

WASHINGTON MEMO is written by Mennonite Central Committee U.S. Washington Office staff. It interprets national legislation and policy, seeking to reflect biblical concerns for justice and peace as represented in the work and statements of MCC U.S. and Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches. All biblical quotes are from the New Revised Standard Version, unless otherwise noted.

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A Place for Returning Prisoners?

Every year, nearly 600,000 people will reenter communities from state and federal prisons. We are all part of their new start. There's an assumption that the term of imprisonment solves many problems for both prisoner and society. But nearly two-thirds of released prisoners are re-arrested for a felony or serious misdemeanor within three years of release. Some experts claim that the crimes associated with recidivism could be reduced by half with reentry programs.

Congress has proposed a modest initial step to aid former prisoners, states and communities. Representatives Rob Portman (R-OH) and Danny Davis (D-IL) introduced *The Second Chance Act*, H.R. 4676, with cosponsors Chris Cannon (R-UT), Steve Chabot (R-OH), Stephanie Tubbs Jones (D-OH) and Mark Souder (R-IN). It focuses on four major areas: jobs, housing, mental health and substance abuse treatment, and strengthening families.

It provides federal grants for various programs, including:

- community-based mentoring for adult offenders;
- post-release housing and substance abuse recovery programs;
- collaboration among correction facilities, colleges and employment services;
- mental health and contagious diseases treatment, and
- family-based services for parents and children.

Barriers to successful reentry are well established. In many states, ex-felons cannot get professional certification such as a barber's license. They can't vote. They are often ineligible for public housing or medical benefits. They may need assistance with education or reunification with families. They receive little or no vocational training. Infrequently, they may get only bus fare upon release.

Violence and misdoings cause great harm to persons and communities. No one wants to discount, excuse or reward that. Yet persistent social barriers represent underpinnings of fear. Lack of public investment and commitment will allow fears to continue to the neglect of restoration.

It is unhealthy to relegate prisoners as permanent enemies—people to be always feared. After all, acts of faith and forgiveness can bring surprising results. In his last State of the Union address, President Bush said, "America is the land of the second chance, and when the gates of the prison open, the path ahead should lead to a better life." In many places, the Bible asks us to practice a mutual love that is actively shared. This is the grace—not just of second, but of many chances—that leads to everyone's restoration. ■

BY DAVID M. WHETTSTONE

Every year, nearly 600,000 people will reenter communities from state and federal prisons. We are all part of their new start.

CAPITAL QUOTES

The Supreme Court has "made clear that a state of war is not a blank check for the president when it comes to the rights of the nation's citizens."

—Justice Sandra Day O'Connor

"The presence of free trade agreements in Latin America and the Caribbean has been incompatible with human development. We denounce the Free Trade Agreement between Central America and the United States (CAFTA) . . ."

—pastoral letter from Protestant church leaders in Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama, July 8, 2004.

"Being poor is a state of mind."

—U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Secretary Alphonso Jackson explaining to Congress why he refuses to discuss low-income housing.

From Persecution to Prejudice

BY JANNA BOWMAN

Janna Bowman was on special assignment in the MCC Washington Office, May–July, 2004

Fear inhibits outreach that could assist war victims in their personal healing and establishment of some semblance of economic stability.

In Colombia 1,000 unarmed civilians are forcibly displaced each day as a result of the armed conflict—guerrilla, paramilitary and military activity. By the end of 2003, the number of internal refugees approached three million.

While internal refugees often flee with nothing but the clothes on their back, city dwellers often fear that they bring danger with them. They fear that the displaced are merely posing as victims, and are really the enemy: wolves in sheep's clothing. Wealthy urbanites associate the duress and violence largely concentrated in rural areas with the families huddled outside their well-stocked supermarkets and bookstores. The displaced are a visual reminder of a brutal conflict many city residents prefer to ignore. And they don't go away. Instead, more and more arrive each day. They are left in the streets and pushed into the burgeoning shantytowns that circle the cities, referred to as "misery belts."

Issues of race and culture factor into the national xenophobia as well. While Afro-Colombians and indigenous people comprise 25 percent and 2 percent of the population respectively, a disproportionate number of Colombia's internal refugees are from these minority groups. The displacement rate of Afro-Colombians, for instance, is 20 percent higher than the general population's.

One Afro-Colombian woman who fled the Atlantic coast describes the hostile reception she received in Bogota: "They think we are the enemy, but we fled persecution! We are treated worse than dogs, because at least people care for their pets."

The national government of Colombia does little to counter this xenophobia. The country's resources are channeled towards paying the external debt and winning the war militarily. There is no effective or comprehensive response to the victims.

Scores of Colombians have no alternative but to flee their country and seek international protection. But fear of Colombia's war victims is not isolated within the national borders. Colombians fleeing to Ecuador are increasingly met with suspicion and hostility by their neighbors as well. They are considered a "problem" instead of a victimized population. Fear inhibits outreach that could assist war victims in their personal healing and establishment of some semblance of economic stability.

In recent years, the United States has sent over three billion dollars to Colombia, over 80 percent of which is destined for the military and the police. But a military solution will not provide a sustainable solution to Colombia's complex web of structural problems, violent conflict and deep distrust. It would be more helpful for the United States to provide support for a negotiated solution rather than fuel for conflict escalation.

U.S. Christians can join this call from the Mennonite Church of Colombia and urge elected officials to address the root causes of conflict, provide a comprehensive response to the displaced and include the victims' voices in dialogues with the armed groups. ■

PARTNER STORY

Forgive Me For Bothering You

I recently returned from a three-year term with MCC where I served with Justapaz, the Mennonite justice and peace ministry based in Bogota. Interaction with internal refugees was common. A poignant encounter outside the local grocery store illustrates the plight of Colombia's war victims well. A single father sidled up to me, assuming that I would fear and reject him. "I won't hurt you," he said. "It's just that my children are hungry. Forgive me for bothering you."

—Janna Bowman

The Roots of Ethnic Conflict

Since the end of the Cold War, ethnic and religious conflicts have surged into the horrified consciousness of people in the United States. We learned about the scarcely imaginable genocide of 800,000 Tutsis by Hutus in Rwanda. We read gruesome stories of ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia. Currently, the world anguishes as Arab militias have killed 30,000 black Africans in the Darfur region of Sudan, driving a million from their land and placing multitudes at grave risk of starvation.

When I served with MCC in Mexico in the early 1990s, I encountered a curious situation of seemingly religious conflict in the municipality of San Juan Chamula. In one particular county, the majority community—embracing a mixture of distorted Catholicism and local traditional religion—were expelling families of Protestants and Catholics loyal to the official Catholic leadership. Thirty thousand were living in exile.

These kinds of conflicts might be thought of as stemming from an irrational fear of strangers. Except that in many cases the killers and the killed are not strangers. In Rwanda, Tutsis and Hutus alike were professing Christians and next door neighbors. Inter-marriage was not uncommon. In Darfur, almost everyone is Muslim. And in Chamula, everyone belonged to the same ethnic group, spoke the same language and lived in the same communities.

So why do people oppress and kill their neighbors? Often, powerful leaders exploit people's fear and stir up hatred for political and economic gain. The colonizing British insisted on strict categories distinguishing

Hutus and Tutsis; and they selected the minority Tutsis to become the native elite. This laid the groundwork for future ethnic conflict. The Sudanese government transformed long-standing, but relatively manageable local conflicts over water and cattle grazing, into mass murder, torture and rape, in order to gain a firmer hold on Darfur.

In Chamula, people who became Protestant stopped buying the local liquor and borrowing money to participate in alcohol-drenched festivals. This threatened powerful economic interests. In the United States, too, some politicians stir up racial or anti-immigrant animosity to further their own careers.

Leaders who are fanning the flames of fear must be identified and addressed. But people of faith also have a more basic contribution. A gospel of peace, the work of conflict transformation and strong inter-ethnic Christian congregations can make it more difficult for the fear and hate mongers to succeed.

Visit www.mcc.org/us/washington for an updated Hotline action alert calling on the U.S. government to take further action under international law to help end the campaign of terror in Darfur, Sudan. ■

BY MARTIN SHUPACK

Often, powerful leaders exploit people's fear and stir up hatred for political and economic gain.

Sharing Humanness and Herbs

PARTNER STORY

An enemy," according to writer Gene Knudsen Hoffman, "is a person whose story we have not heard." In situations of conflict, dialogue that crosses borders can be very powerful.

Lee Wheeler works with MCC's agricultural programs in North Korea. Despite decades of tense relations with the United States and President Bush's designation of North Korea as part of the "axis of evil," Lee says "there is definitely more openness and significant changes are occurring in the country, especially in the last two years."

Lee tells the story of an American colleague whose wife was recently diagnosed with lung cancer. At one farm where MCC provides agricultural assistance, the North Korean workers prepared a packet of traditional herbs for her, even though medicine—like most things in North Korea these days—is in short supply. "The inherent humanness in each of us has given us room to make some significant connections," says Lee.

—Lora Steiner

American As Apple Pie?

BY BETHANY SPICHER

When some pick the apples and others eat the pie, the American dream is not for everyone.

They're stealing our jobs! They're destroying our culture! And they don't even speak English! What's happening to our apple-pie America?

Those who would post "Keep Out" on U.S. borders not only forget that their ancestors were likely immigrants. They also forget that the U.S. economy, which depends on the contributions of immigrants, has already posted "Help Wanted" around the world. Even the apples in our "American" pies—in fact, 85 percent of our nation's \$28 billion produce industry—are cultivated and harvested through the labor of migrant farmworkers.

More than two million farmworkers, including 100,000 children, work in the United States, according to FoodFirst. Working conditions are dangerous: injuries and illness disable farmworkers at a rate three times that of the general population. Living conditions are harsh, with sporadic access to clean water and working toilets, and prolonged exposure to pesticides.

Meanwhile, the average farmworker earns \$7,500 per year. So who's reaping the benefits? Often it's not the contractors who employ the farmworkers, nor the growers who hire the contractors, but the handful of conglomerates and corporations that increasingly control the food and agriculture industry. Archer Daniels Midland (ADM), for example, whose motto is "Supermarket to the World," gleaned \$1.7 billion in profits in 2003.

Corporations like ADM demand rock-bottom prices from growers and often negotiate rates before planting. For many small farmers, the risk is too great. Even the large growers often feel that labor is the only expense to cut. Many hire undocumented workers whose fear of deportation keeps them from challenging low wages and poor conditions. And increasingly, growers demand more labor for the same price.

In Florida, for instance, a farmworker could earn minimum wage by picking 13 buckets of tomatoes per day in 1997. Today, in

Immokalee, Fla., a farmworker must pick 100–150 buckets to earn \$40–\$60 per day, working 7 days a week, 10–12 hours daily. The Coalition of Immokalee Workers has organized a boycott against Taco Bell, the largest buyer of tomatoes from their region, to demand a piece rate of one penny more per pound, an increase that would almost double the workers' pay.

The irony is that many immigrants were farmers in their own right before leaving their homes for fields and factories in the United States. U.S. trade agreements like NAFTA have devastated agriculture abroad; in Mexico, for instance, 1.7 million subsistence farmers have left their land since 1994 when NAFTA took effect. It's estimated that seven percent of pre-NAFTA U.S. farmworkers were undocumented. Now half of all farmworkers are undocumented, indicating a massive migration of displaced people.

In a recent speech to the League of United Latin American Citizens, President Bush declared, "For this administration, *el sueño Americano es para todos*. (The American dream is for everyone). Meanwhile, however, the White House was pressuring Congress to block consideration of the Agricultural Job Opportunity, Benefits and Security Act (AgJOBS), a bill that would offer improved labor protections and a chance at legal status for farmworkers.

AgJOBS, which has 63 co-sponsors in the Senate, represents years of negotiations among farmworker organizations, labor unions and agricultural employers. If Congressional leadership allowed a vote, the bipartisan bill would pass easily; but for months, debate on AgJOBS has been delayed because of pressure from the nation's anti-immigrant lobby.

Clearly, when some pick the apples and others eat the pie, the American dream is not for everyone. Those who harvest our food need our voices and votes to support boycotts, challenge trade agreements and work for the day when everyone—including farmworkers—gets a piece of the pie. ■

OUR WEB SITE GETS FRESH

Visit the new and improved MCC Washington Office Web site to find a fresh look, a new *True Security* page, updated tools for advocacy and articles about each of the topics we cover: www.mcc.org/us/washington

Walking in Migrants' Shoes

IN OTHER'S WORDS

Ten years after the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) took effect, ten years after the U.S. border with Mexico was militarized to stop the increasing flow of "illegal" immigrants, volunteer organizations working on the border asked Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT) to join them for a summer campaign to raise immigration issues in the public consciousness.

The Migrant Trail Walk, June 7–13, 2004 was the seventy-five mile kickoff for the No More Deaths campaign to raise awareness of the issues facing immigrants and people in the United States. Numbering from 23–200 people on various days, the walk followed the desert trails from the Mexican border to Tucson, Arizona.

The walkers had water stops every one-and-a-half miles and snack breaks every other stop. Medical staff handled emergencies. Tents sheltered the walkers at night. Support vehicles carried walkers afflicted with blisters and fatigue. Still, one person each of the first three days succumbed to heat exhaustion and had to be transported to an emergency health center.

Temperatures over 100 degrees make it impossible for "illegal" travelers to carry sufficient water. The desert can be an alien, brutal place. Walkers met travelers who asked if they were close to Los Angeles or New York.

Steady news coverage throughout the walk placed the issues before the U.S. population and Hispanic public worldwide. Blisters built compassion and understanding. The "legal" walkers did not face death, but risking the migrant trails still pulled them into an entirely different level of commitment to this cause.

In 1994, NAFTA promised strong economies for Mexico and the United States. It said that job opportunities would increase after Mexico removed tariffs for incoming goods and subsidies for local products. Corporations would cross the borders freely, unhindered by environmental standards or trade unions.

In places like Chiapas, Mexico, low coffee and corn prices drove people off the land. CPTers saw the price of coffee plummet from thirty pesos to eight pesos per kilogram as the World Bank encouraged Vietnam to plant huge plots of coffee. NAFTA forced Mexico to drop the subsidies that had been in place for corn farmers, so *Chiapaneca* families could no longer compete with U.S.-subsidized corn. The native population in Chiapas traveled north, with other impoverished Mexicans so they could support their families.

Hundreds of thousands of men and women left their homes in Mexico to work in U.S. fields and factories. In 2003, more than 200 immigrant travelers died crossing the border to access jobs in the United States. About 300,000 were apprehended and returned to Mexico.

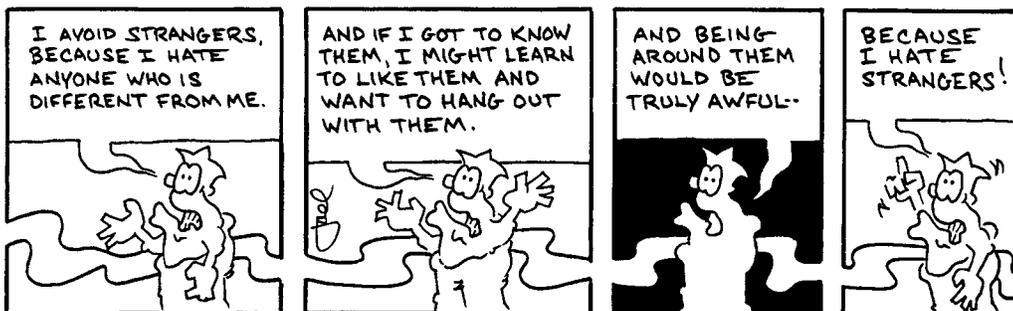
Barriers constructed in San Diego, Calif., Texas and elsewhere, and increased numbers of border patrol personnel push migrants into the dangerous Sonoran desert. Immigration politicians have erroneously assumed the dangers of this route and collateral deaths would stop Mexicans from coming. However, migrant support programs say that 500 travelers still cross the border south of Tucson illegally each night. ■

BY CLIFF KINDY

Cliff Kindy is a member of the Christian Peacemaker Teams delegation to the U.S./Mexico border. For more information, visit the No More Deaths campaign at www.nomoredeaths.org.

The walkers had water stops every one-and-a-half miles. Still, one person each of the first three days succumbed to heat exhaustion.

Pontius' Puddle





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SOUND THE TRUMPET!

ISSUE	SUMMARY	ADVOCACY NEEDED
SEPARATION BARRIER	Israel is building a 430-mile separation barrier, which is gobbling up Palestinian land, causing a humanitarian crisis and undermining any prospect for a viable two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.	Ask President Bush to insist that any Israeli separation barrier be built wholly on Israeli land. Send a copy of your letter to the MCC Washington Office.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Middle East Advocacy

In response to the Israeli separation barrier, the MCC Washington Office is launching *Bridges Not Walls*—a campaign to collect 5,000 letters and drawings that encourage better approaches for building peace and security. For more information, visit www.mcc.org/us/washington. To order a copy of *The Dividing Wall*, a new MCC video and DVD, call toll free (888) 563-4676 or visit www.mcc.org/catalog.

High School Essay Contest

The annual MCC Washington Office high school essay contest provides opportunity for Menonite and Brethren in Christ youth to reflect on public policy and Anabaptist faith. This year's themes include the draft, immigration, the Israel-Palestine conflict, partisan politics and the relationship between the gospel and peace-building. Visit www.mcc.org/us/washington for more information.