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ADVOCATING FOR IMMIGRANTS

Young Adults Speak Out

Biblical Views on Immigration

BY KRISTA ZIMMERMAN

The Bible teaches that all people, regardless of national origin, are made in the image of God.

It can be tempting to view the trials and complexities of human migration as merely a political challenge, a task in which governments must mitigate between the need for order and the space for opportunity. For people of faith, however, the call for justice for immigrants, and the reform of immigration systems, is a question of Christian faithfulness.

The Bible teaches that all people, regardless of national origin, are made in the image of God and deserve to be treated with dignity and respect (Genesis 1:26–27, 9:6). It also teaches us to show love and compassion to the strangers among us (Deuteronomy 10:18–19, Matthew 25:31–46), to love our neighbors as ourselves (Mark 12:31) and to be “Good Samaritans” to those in need (Luke 10:25–37). Although the Bible teaches respect for the rule of law (Romans 13:1–7), it also teaches us to oppose unjust laws and systems that oppress people made in God’s image, especially the vulnerable (Isaiah 10:1–4, Jeremiah 7:1–7, Acts 5:29).

Immigration laws and the causes of migration can be unjust and oppressive forces in human societies. People unwillingly leave their homes due to wars, persecution and severe economic hardship, over which they have no control. In the United States, our immigration policies force families to live apart for long periods of time and create a system of border control under which people die.

The articles and perspectives included in this issue of the *Memo* discuss the violence and injustice suffered by migrants. In response, they offer faith reflections, policy suggestions and Christian hope.

Again, we’ve asked Anabaptist young adults to lend us their perspectives. Rebecca Bartel, serving in Latin America, describes the injustices suffered by Haitians, which often prompt people from that country to leave. Greg Koop, a Mennonite Voluntary Service worker, writes about the militarization of the U.S./Mexico border and U.S. immigration policies that attack the symptoms of unjust economic policies rather than the policies themselves. Rashawn Moore, who served with MCC West Coast last summer, recounts the brutality of walking across the U.S./Mexico border.

Theo Sittler and Angong Acuil both discuss the unjust economic and political systems that cause many people to migrate. Justin Shenk writes about national identity and its negative consequences for asylum seekers. And Daryl Byler describes the mass exodus of individuals from Iraq.

The stories and reflections of these writers depict the brokenness of immigration systems and migration experiences in both the United States and abroad. They also make the case for just, compassionate and faithful responses. ■

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BY J. DARYL BYLER

The United States—which has spent nearly \$400 billion to execute the war in Iraq—has done little to respond to the plight of Iraqi refugees.

Mass Exodus

“War will forcefully exile millions of Iraqis from the safety of their homes and the security of their support systems,” I wrote to President Bush during an extended fast before the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq four years ago.

At the time, Iraq’s infrastructure was already decimated from previous wars and a dozen years of crushing economic sanctions. Agencies like MCC feared that another war would push the situation over the edge.

A week before the United States attacked Iraq in March 2003, *The New York Times* reported that “relief organizations in the region say they have neither sufficient supplies nor enough money to cope with the millions of injured, displaced and starving people that could result.”

We were wrong in our gloomy predictions back then—but only for the short-term. In the immediate aftermath of the “shock and awe” U.S. military campaign, there was no massive flow of displaced Iraqis.

Today the situation is very different. The United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees (UNHCR) reports that one in eight Iraqis have fled their homes.

More than two million Iraqis are now living as refugees in Jordan, Syria, Egypt, Lebanon and other countries. Another 1.5 million are displaced inside Iraq. By

the end of 2007, the UNHCR predicts that 4.3 million Iraqis—out of a population of 26 million—will be displaced.

“The burden on host communities and governments in the region is enormous,” says Antonio Guterres, U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, in an article reported in *The Jordan Times* on Jan. 11, 2007.

Today, neighboring Jordan hosts more than 700,000 Iraqi refugees. But, according to Refugees International, Iraqis inside Jordan “live in constant fear of deportation.”

Jordan, which also hosts more than two million Palestinian refugees, has now closed its border to young Iraqi men—fearful that the chaos in Iraq will spill into Jordan.

According to aid agencies, the United States—which has spent nearly \$400 billion to execute the war in Iraq—has done little to respond to the plight of Iraqi refugees.

In his State of the Union address in late January, President Bush admitted that the situation today in Iraq is dire. “This is not the fight we entered in Iraq,” he said, “but it is the fight we are in.”

It may be true that the United States did not wish for this outcome. But the chaos and displacement of people were predictable. Indeed, globally, war is one of the primary causes of people migrations.

Even now, there is growing talk of a U.S. military action against Iran. Before the United States marches off into another war, it would be good to remember what happened in Iraq. And to ask why things would be any different this time. ■

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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To contact the MCC U.S. Washington Office, please see our address on the back page. See our weekly commentary at www.thirdway.com and visit our web site at www.mcc.org/us/washington.

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Walk the Trail

YOUNG ADULTS SPEAK OUT

BY RASHAWN MOORE

Rashawn Moore is a recent graduate of Bluffton College in Ohio. He has served with MCC West Coast on the U.S./ Mexico border and is currently a Legislative Intern in the MCC U.S. Washington Office.

During the summer of 2006 I had a unique opportunity to participate in the “Migrant Trail Walk,” which mimicked, to a small degree, the journey of many undocumented migrants across the southern border. The journey began in Sasabe, Mexico and ended in Tucson, Arizona. It spanned seven days and covered 75 miles. The desert temperature soared well over 100 degrees by midday. We would fill our water bottles with cool water and within 30 minutes we were left to drink near-boiling water. Every night my swollen feet would throb to the point that I could no longer walk easily.

Once we reached our ending point for the day, the hunt for shade was on. We were forced to find a way to keep our minds off the heat until the sun went down. I often attempted to remain stationary to conserve energy.

Each day was a struggle to continue. I wondered what would make a person endure so much pain, time and time again. We were well prepared, unlike many migrants. We had a medical staff, vehicles, regular water stops, a community of faith that fed us at night, and we were not dodging the border patrol, nor dealing with unscrupulous human traffickers.

I realized there must be something other than a “free handout” and contempt for the law to drive people to cross the desert with only a gallon or two of hot water for six to seven days in 100 degree-plus temperatures. I often wondered if the experience

and path walked by many a biblical figure was similar in some regards to the plight of the migrant.

Whether we agree with what the migrants are doing or do not, the issue is no longer just a matter of law. The faith community cannot knowingly sit idle, pretending that the suffering and dying of the migrant is simply a legal issue.

The church as a whole has a moral obligation to stand in opposition to unjust policies that cause many to risk their lives in the desert for a new reality. We must call on Congress to establish a safe and humane immigration system consistent with the values of those who elected them. Those of us in the faith community must refocus the immigration issue in terms of its humanitarian impact on the dignity and welfare of migrants and the moral implications it has on us all. We must call on Congress to place the human consequences of a failed immigration system at the forefront of debate. With a new Congress, we are presented with a new opportunity to refocus on what is most important in this debate: the human toll in lives and family displacement.

After participating in the Migrant Trail Walk I can no longer sit idle as people die. I have the ability and a moral obligation to ease their suffering and bear witness to their struggle for survival by compelling this new Congress to take a deliberate and intentional look at the human toll of a failed immigration system. ■

Every night my swollen feet would throb to the point that I could no longer walk easily.

Pontius' Puddle



A Higher Standard

BY GREG KOOP

Greg Koop is a Mennonite Voluntary Service worker in Tucson, Arizona, serving with Borderlinks, a nonprofit organization that offers educational experiences on the U.S./Mexico border. He is from Goshen, Indiana.

Immigration policies will shape how an increasingly large portion of the U.S. population will be treated in the coming decades, and will be one of the defining issues of my generation.

In President Bush's recent State of the Union speech, his position on immigration reform was eagerly anticipated as one of *the* hot-button issues of the new Congress. The president played both sides of the aisle by saying the new laws would be "without animosity" but also "without amnesty." The overarching message remained that undocumented migrants had violated our laws by sneaking into our country and had to be punished. By contrast, as Christians we are called to befriend the alien, love our neighbors, and freely offer forgiveness and grace. On the issue of immigration, the values of faith seem to be out of step with punitive reforms and call us to a higher standard of welcome and mercy.

Through Mennonite Voluntary Service, I have worked in two border communities: Harlingen, Texas and Tucson, Arizona, which are affected by federal border legislation firsthand. In the summer of 2005, Harlingen's rail crossings swelled with cargo trains pulling hundreds of U.S. military vehicles on their way to the southern border. In the border towns south of Tucson, the militarization is perhaps even more apparent.

The crossing between Nogales, Arizona and Nogales, Sonora in Mexico is divided by a wall 15 feet high made from old landing strips used in the first Gulf War. The two towns, which used to share families, heritage, and culture, are now split by floodlights, patrolling Humvees, and armed National Guard units in full camouflage on the U.S. side. These measures have forced migrants into one of the most inhospitable landscapes on earth, just for a chance at a better life. Each year, hundreds of migrants die of heat stroke while trying to cross the Sonoran desert.

Despite temperatures over one hundred degrees, venomous animals, and unscrupulous smugglers, millions of migrants still cross into the United States without documentation because the root economic causes remain unresolved. Instead of fixing the unjust economic system manifested in legislation like the North American Free Trade Agreement, our policies only attack the symptoms of economic injustice.

Recently proposed guest worker programs are one way in which the federal government is offering alternatives in hopes of reducing undocumented crossings. Unfortunately, many of these proposals leave much to be desired. Without an avenue to permanent legal status and a guarantee of the same worker's rights afforded U.S. citizens, these policies amount to state-sponsored exploitation. Measures that just allow workers to come here temporarily to do manual labor are not the answer. We should not send the message that people are good enough to do our dirty work but not to live in our cities and neighborhoods.

As members of a global church, how can we allow our brothers and sisters from other countries to be treated as second-class humans? Immigration policies will shape how an increasingly large portion of the U.S. population will be treated in the coming decades, and will be one of the defining issues of my generation. As Christians, as Anabaptists, and as global citizens, we must advocate for economic policies that provide living wages for our neighbors to the south as well as support border policy that recognizes our common humanity. ■

1994 Wasn't So Long Ago, It Would Seem

1994 seems like such a long time ago, I thought to myself as I prepared to interview Haitian rice farmers about the long-term effects of the economic conditions imposed on the country's rice sector in that year.

But in Haiti, people remember history not in years, but by presidential regimes, and this was the year that democratically elected President Jean-Bertrand Aristide came back to his country after a military coup d'état had forced him out in 1991, only eight months after being elected. It was the year that the military dictatorship and reign of terror ended after three long years, and international sanctions on Haiti were lifted.

It was also the year that the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the United States and other donor countries imposed a reduction on import tariffs for rice, lowering the tariffs from 35 percent to three percent, and allowing for U.S. subsidized rice to flood the local markets and effectively ruin the local rice economy.

People have not forgotten, and a destroyed agricultural industry is still very much a reality for a population dependent on agricultural production for the mainstay of the national economy. Nor have they forgotten the horror that was the brutal military regime and the devastating effects of the misguidedly imposed international sanctions in a vain attempt to force the military commanders to adopt democratic measures.

Haitians have also not forgotten the hundreds of lives lost in attempts to cross the short but perilous 600-mile barrier of water between Miami and Port-au-Prince. During the years of the sanctions and the military regime, the U.S. Coast Guard registered some 65,000 Haitian refugees intercepted and sent back to a political and economic calamity.

When I asked about 1994, farmers were eager to inform me of the devastation that imported U.S. rice, which sells at half the

price of Haitian rice on the market, has brought to the local economy. This devastation has caused many peasants from rural areas to migrate to the cities, like Port-au-Prince, where 95 percent of the workforce is employed in the informal sector and more than half of the population lives on the threshold of poverty. It is from this city where the majority of Haitians climb into rickety boats, gambling their savings and their lives, to seek a better and more just future for themselves and their families.

The reasons for Haitians to flee their country have always been two-fold: political and economic, and they are mutually reinforcing.

Haiti is the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere and at the moment, the most politically unstable. Foreign economic policies have only served to exacerbate the already ubiquitous poverty and the international community has yet to respond adequately to the violent and organized crime that threatens to overwhelm the country, as the latest International Crisis Group analysis on Haiti reports.

The reasons for the exodus from their homeland are intricately connected with the decisions of foreign governments and institutions that don't seem to consider the well-being of Haitians in the equations of structural adjustment and aid conditions.

1994 seemed like a long time ago to me, but to the Haitians I was fortunate enough to spend time with, it was yet another marker in the tumultuous history of a country that has come to represent neo-colonial failure and the mistaken labeling of economic refugees, in search of a just piece of the proverbial pie, as economic opportunists. ■

YOUNG ADULTS SPEAK OUT

BY REBECCA BARTEL

Rebecca Bartel is the MCC Latin America Policy Analyst based in Bogotá, Colombia.

When I asked about 1994, farmers were eager to inform me of the devastation that imported U.S. rice, which sells at half the price of Haitian rice, has brought to the local economy.

TO RESPOND TO HAITIANS' CALL FOR JUSTICE

See Sound the Trumpet, page 8. Learn more at the Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti: www.ijdh.org.

The Missing Link

BY THEO SITHTER

"Instead of working the fields like I do [in Mexico], I worked in a factory in Corona, California." —Victor Reyes (Mexican farmer forced to migrate)

Why do so many come to the United States? Why do families with small children and pregnant mothers walk hundreds of miles across the hot desert to find "opportunity"? The immigration debate in the public arena has been shaped by the media and the politicians. This issue has been shaped to make it look like a problem or a threat to the United States. However, there is a missing link in this debate. Very few are talking about the root causes of migrants in the United States.

Since the early 1990s the United States has been pursuing "free trade" agreements with countries in the interests of U.S. commercial expansion. The first such agreement was the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which was signed in 1993 by the United States, Canada and Mexico. "Free trade" agreements open up foreign markets for U.S. companies and investors. These agreements lower or eliminate tariffs so that goods from the United States can freely flow into foreign markets. This flow

of goods has been detrimental to small-scale businesses and farmers in the receiving countries. Livelihoods have been destroyed, families have been torn apart and people have lost their hopes and dreams.

Current trade policies only reflect the interests of corporations and large-scale farmers. Since NAFTA went into effect in 1994, the United States has been exporting corn to Mexico at an enormous rate. Mexico fulfilled its end of the agreement to eliminate tariffs on corn, opening the way for the flooding of Mexican markets by cheap U.S. corn, which dropped prices below living standards. The United States vastly subsidizes its agricultural products so that they can be sold at below-market prices. According to Oxfam America, subsidies only benefit a small number of U.S. farmers. Seventy-eight percent of the subsidies go to eight percent of all U.S. farmers. This great disparity is detrimental to family farms in the United States and to farmers in Mexico and other countries.

Farmer Jorge Vasquez Martinez explains, "ten years ago, I could go to the plaza and sell my corn at my price, [but] now you have to sell to the *bodegas* there, and they set the price that is not enough to live on." Jorge and many others have made the difficult decision to leave their homeland behind in hopes of surviving in the United States.

It is time to speak up about policies that affect millions of people who are thousands of miles removed from us. It is time to reform the system of subsidies and trade policies that have detrimental effects on poor farmers in Latin America and in other parts of the world. In the coming year the farm bill will be coming up for reauthorization. Trade will also be a highly debated issue in the new Congress. Some leaders in Congress have indicated that trade policies need to be reformed, but they need to hear from conscientious people speaking up for justice on behalf of our brothers and sisters. ■

Take Action

Help the media and the government to find the missing link in the immigration debate. Go to www.oxfamamerica.org/agriculture for information on the farm bill. Go to www.mcc.org/acp to read the story of a Mexican farmer who lost everything, in the November/December 2006 issue of a *Common Place*.

HEALTHCARE WORKERS

Health workers play a vital role in our world, providing healthcare and disease prevention and treatment. Despite this need, many health systems are facing a severe shortage of workers. One of the ways the United States solves this dilemma is by attracting immigrants from developing countries. This exacerbates the already existing crisis in the developing world. Emigration of health workers from developing countries undermines economic development and efforts to improve access to health services.

The Joint Learning Initiative on Human Resources for Health and Development estimates that the global shortage exceeds four million workers. Shortages in Sub-Saharan Africa, however, are far more acute than in any other region of the world. The World Health Report 2006 states that the exodus of skilled professionals in the midst of such need places Africa at the epicenter of the global health workforce crisis. The World Health Organization points out that the problem is particularly complex in those countries most affected by HIV, as HIV renders health workers themselves vulnerable to death and disease.

One of the ways to combat the global shortage is to encourage the U.S. government to expand its internal health care workforce to meet its own needs. It can also support programs that train health workers abroad and help retain them by improving healthcare systems in their home countries.

—Angong Acuil

Creating a “Culture of Welcome”

The Washington Office favors comprehensive immigration legislation that is fair and just, recognizing our biblical, prescriptive, welcoming stance and our own history as immigrants.

After Sept. 11 and the Patriot Act of 2001, life became much harder for refugees and those seeking asylum in the United States. Provisions of the Patriot Act, such as the material support bar, have been used to deny entry to thousands of qualified asylum seekers.

The material support bar, as expanded by the Patriot Act and the Real ID Act of 2005, has taken its toll on the U.S. refugee program, which admitted less than 32,000 of an authorized 70,000 refugees in 2006. Asylum seekers have been refused on the basis of providing as little as \$1.00 to groups engaging in broadly defined “terrorist activity.” Many of these “terrorist groups” are former U.S. allies, or people’s movements engaged in fighting repressive military regimes. Individuals are now being turned away for providing any material support to these groups, including involuntary support—for example, being robbed at gunpoint.

Historically, in times of chaos and uncertainty, people have grasped for a stabilizing identity. Often, this need for stability takes the form of a national identity that is based on a racial and cultural ranking system. This national identity protects itself by becoming, simultaneously, more inclusive to those on the inside, and more exclusive to all others. This can be observed in the modern debate on migration and, more specifically, in the United States’ move to bar asylum seekers for revolutionary activity it once encouraged.

While the allure to embrace a national identity is a compelling force, promising protection from outside forces, it is often incompatible with the teachings of Jesus and the biblical concept of the body of Christ.

Leviticus 19:33–34 states: “When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do [the stranger] wrong. The stranger who sojourns with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love [the stranger] as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”

To “love the stranger as yourself” is not part of the daily political rhetoric heard on Capitol Hill. But it is a message that needs to be heard from the pulpit, a voice resounding from the pews of our churches to the seats of Congress.

Please join the Washington Office in advocating for a just and fair immigration reform and for legislation that amends the unintended negative effects of the material support ban. ■

BY JUSTIN M. SHENK

After Sept. 11 and the Patriot Act of 2001, life became much harder for refugees and those seeking asylum in the United States.

CAPITAL QUOTES

“And tonight, I have a high privilege and distinct honor of my own—as the first president to begin the State of the Union message with these words: Madam Speaker.”

—President George W. Bush on January 23, 2007

“The true state of this union is war and the neglect of an urban agenda. The truth is the president’s domestic agenda is being swept aside as the administration focuses solely on escalating the war.”

—Rep. Dennis J. Kucinich (D-Ohio), responding to President Bush’s 2007 State of the Union address

“The president has been steadfast in continuing to put this critical issue on the table, and last night he strengthened that commitment by making comprehensive immigration reform one of his top domestic priorities this year. We must take advantage of this historic opportunity to enact the best possible reform in 2007.”

—Janet Murguia, National Council of La Raza, responding to the president’s State of the Union address



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ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED

SOUND THE TRUMPET!

ISSUE	SUMMARY	ADVOCACY NEEDED
INDIAN HEALTH CARE	In the 109th Congress, the Indian Health Care Improvement Act (IHCA), S.1607, came closer than ever to being passed. Both Sen. Byron Dorgan (D-N.D.), chair of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, and Rep. Nick Rahal (D-W.Va.) of the House Committee on Natural Resources have listed reauthorization of IHCA as a priority. The bill, which has strong support from the National Congress of American Indians, is expected to be introduced early in the 110th Congress.	Please help support this valuable legislation when it is reintroduced.
HAITI DEBT RELIEF	In the 109th Congress, Rep. Maxine Waters (D-Calif.) introduced the Haiti debt cancellation resolution calling on international financial institutions (International Monetary Fund, World Bank and International Development Bank) to cancel Haiti's debt. This resolution gained 68 co-sponsors before Congress finished up business last year. Rep. Waters will reintroduce the resolution in the new 110th Congress sometime in the spring.	Sign-up for Latin America/Caribbean hotlines from the MCC Washington Office and be on the lookout for this resolution. Please help support this resolution when it is reintroduced.

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