

The Post and Courier

Winner of the Pulitzer Prize

Evangelicals, beware of alternative facts and refugee policy

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January 28, 2017

We have quickly seen that candidate Trump and President Trump are one and the same.

His inaugural address communicated that our new president intended to make good on the statements he made at rallies across the country. And of all of the promises Trump vowed to keep once he became president of the United States, a commitment to “make America safe again” was a continual narrative.

His tweet late Tuesday came as a vow to fulfill those promises on the campaign trail.

“Big day planned on NATIONAL SECURITY tomorrow. Among many other things, we will build the wall!”

Several drafts have been leaked of “Protecting the Nation from Terrorist Attacks by Foreign Nationals.” One draft copy, now widely distributed (and reported on in The Washington Post), is eight pages long and puts many new policies in place, most notably a 120-day moratorium on the Refugee Admissions Program, a dramatic cut of the overall number of refugees allowed into the U.S. this year, and an indefinite ban on refugees from Syria, with the suggestion that refugees from additional countries will also likely be barred.

Like many people, I agree with Trump that we need a greater focus on national security and a more clear engagement in the war against radical Islamism. Furthermore, I believe that good people can have strong (and divergent) views on border security and other issues.

However, in this case, I’m concerned that the president is operating on generated fear rather than facts. We need a better way.

In the flurry of Trump’s campaign, his promise resonated well in the ears of many Americans who were seeking safety, fearful of the rise of terrorism in our world today.

Fear is a real emotion, and it can cause us to make decisions we wouldn’t have otherwise made. Fear leads us to fix our eyes inward instead of on the “other.”

But, as I’ve written before, at the core of who we are as followers of Christ is a commitment to care for the vulnerable, the marginalized, the abused and the wanderer.

Today, millions of people have had to flee home, safety, family and livelihood due to threats of violence. In fact, according to the United Nations Refugee Agency UNHCR, 1 in every 113

people in our world today has been forcibly displaced from their homes. And each one of these refugees has a name and story.

As fear overcomes us, our ability to see facts clearly also dims. We need clear facts on the issue, not alternative erroneous ones, when it comes to refugees. “Alternative facts” can have incredibly harmful consequences for people made in the image of God who are seeking refuge from violence, oppression and poverty.

And, here’s an important fact: Coming to the United States as a refugee would be one of the worst ways to try and get in our country if you wanted to do harm.

There is simply no evidence that our refugee program has created a significant problem of terrorism. Anyone saying anything else is making up false facts.

We are in what will be, according to former Obama CIA Director Leon Panetta, a decades-long war with radical Islamism. However, refugees are not causing the violence.

They are the ones fleeing it. Almost all recent terrorist attacks in our own nation have come from long-term residents or citizens, not new refugees.

Americans are debating these facts, but incorrect — alternative — facts lead to bad decisions. That’s what’s happening here.

So how should evangelicals respond to the ban on refugees?

First, we must continue to reject false facts.

Evangelicals today desperately need truth. We need to find it in the Bible, and we need to find it in the world around us. Facts are our friends, and we have to look for them. In this case, the data is out there for us to see — if fear has not blinded us to real facts.

The Cato Institute published a very thorough risk analysis on terrorism and immigration that tells us that the odds of an American citizen being killed by a refugee-turned-terrorist is 1 in 3.64 billion per year.

New America also compiled a profile that shows us the overwhelming majority of terrorist acts in the U.S. did not come from foreign infiltrators. These are the types of statistics that we need to know before we start shutting our doors to those who need help.

Second, we need to recapture a vision of what it means that all are made in God’s image.

I’m pro-life because the unborn are made in the image of God, as are refugees.

So, I’m pro-refugee because I am pro-life. When we remember that all people are made in the image of God, we might just see refugees differently, an idea that aligns with the values Americans have held dear, including the past several Republican presidents.

Scott Arbeiter, president of World Relief, says it this way: “The decision to restrict all entry of refugees and other immigrants ... contradicts the American tradition of welcoming families who come to the United States to start their lives again in safety and dignity. The American people —

most of whom can trace their own families' stories through a similar immigrant journey in search of freedom — are a hospitable people.”

He's right. But, it's not just because we are Americans. It's because we are Christians.

God's people should be the first ones to open their arms to refugees. We should welcome them and do what Christians, in your church and mine, have been doing a long time — showing and sharing the love of Jesus with them.

Finally, we must fight for those without a voice.

Trump's executive order means that the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program will be suspended for approximately four months, and when it begins again, it will likely not be the same.

I certainly understand the struggle with fear in our current climate, but I imagine that there are many people on the other side of the world who have experienced fear like you or I have not seen. And they have just been told they have nowhere to turn.

As an American citizen, I cannot change this Executive Order. But as a Christian and kingdom citizen, I cannot cheer for it, and I cannot stay silent. It is time to pray for those who are hurting, and to plead with our leaders to change course.

We are not Europe and refugees can't walk here. We have a well-run and safe refugee resettlement program with a long history of religious group involvement.

And as an evangelical and a board member of the National Association of Evangelicals, I am thankful for its statement supporting refugee resettlement. But, I will add that I am deeply disappointed to see this safe program maligned and discounted by others who use alternative facts to say that it is dangerous in ways it is not.

As Americans who are also Christian, we often cry out, “God bless the United States!” Fear cannot lead us to the point where our only cry left is, “May God have mercy on our souls!”

This is a safe program and one that evangelicals like me say, even if Trump will not, “Give [us] your ... huddled masses, yearning to be free.”

Alternative facts must not lead us to bad choices that hurt the most vulnerable — that's not the way of Jesus and not in line with actual facts.

Ed Stetzer holds the Billy Graham Distinguished Chair at Wheaton College, and recently hosted an evangelical summit on refugee ministry. He wrote this for The Washington Post.