

RELEVANT

Why Christians Shouldn't Be So Quick to Shut the Door on Immigrants and Refugees

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My dad immigrated to the United States in the late 1970s from South Korea and never looked back. He had been orphaned during the Korean War in the 1950s and dreamed of escaping his poverty by immigrating to the United States, a land where “the streets were paved with gold” and you weren’t defined by your poverty. He had no close family back in Korea, no great memories of a wonderful childhood and no solid linkages to a country that was impoverished and war-torn when he left.

Building a business and raising a family in the United States, my dad thrived. His citizenship officer commended him on his command of English and his contributions to the Philadelphia community as a successful small business owner and welcomed my dad as a citizen of the United States. My dad also raised me and my brother to love this country, to become fully “American” and pushed us in every way to be respectful, hard-working and generous with our time and resources in serving others. And for over 30 years, my dad never set foot back on the land in which he was born.

I know what the opportunity to live in the United States has meant for my family. And over the past few years, I’ve been troubled by the policies that are being pursued to shut the door on those fleeing difficult, often life-threatening circumstances, to live in the United States. And what’s even more troubling is that this is happening with the tacit approval, or even full support, of many of those in the Church.

Just as a recent example, the administration announced that they will forcibly remove children from their parents at the border as a deterrence mechanism. I believe we have lost our way as disciples of Jesus to live out the core teachings of Scripture when we justify the forcible separation of parents from their children as a “national security measure.” Being pro-life is about caring for life from womb to tomb, especially for the most vulnerable of our society, and advocating for our neighbors the very things we would want for ourselves.

While many have been rightly outraged over the rhetoric of the president in stereotyping certain groups of immigrants, often using dehumanizing language to characterize them, that rhetoric has belied a marked shift in how our immigration laws are implemented and enforced, and should give us pause as we consider whether the means justify the ends of national security:

- The U.S. is on track to resettle the lowest number of refugees in a single year since the start of the U.S. refugee admissions program in 1980, at a time when we're seeing the largest number of refugees in the world at 22 million. Canada—even though they have a tenth of the population of the United States—is on track to resettle more refugees than the U.S.
- Only 44 Syrian refugees have come into the U.S. in the first half of FY2018. In the same period the year before, around 6,000 Syrian refugees came into the U.S.
- The administration has announced the termination of Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for hundreds of thousands of Haitians, Salvadorans, Nicaraguans, Nepalese and others, many of whom have lived in the United States for over a decade because of natural or humanitarian disasters in their home countries.
- The administration has announced the termination of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) which allows nearly 800,000 individuals who came to the United States as children to have work authorization.
- There has been an increase in the arrest of immigrants without criminal convictions by 146 percent leading to the forcible separation of families. In one case, a father who has five American children, including one with a rare form of cancer, and who had been living in the United States since he was 17 months old, has been called to ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) to be deported. Approximately 5,000 children end up in the foster care system because their parents are deported.
- Children have been forcibly separated from their parents when seeking asylum. In one case, a 7 year-old Congolese girl was forcibly separated from her mother at the border, even as she was requesting asylum after fleeing extreme violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Her mother remains detained in San Diego while the little girl is in Chicago.

Closing the borders on those fleeing persecution, separating families at the border as a form of deterrence and decimating the refugee admissions program when we are facing the world's worst displacement crisis since World War II are not forms of conservatism, it's a form of nativism that is un-American. The policy of separating children from their parents is inhumane and smacks of the family values that so many Christians espouse. Our belief that family unity is central to a stable society should not be contingent on where those families are coming from.

Ironically, even as the president said he wanted to help persecuted Christians overseas, there has been a 80 percent decline in the arrival of persecuted Christian refugees because of the executive orders and suspension of the refugee program that happened over 2017 and early 2018. The countries from which there is significant Christian persecution, including Iran, Iraq and Somalia,

are all countries whose citizens were barred from entering the United States as refugees for months due to the executive orders.

The three main arguments I've heard against welcoming refugees into the United States are based on 1) national security (aren't refugees a national security threat?) 2) economics (don't refugees cost us a lot of money?) and 3) humanitarian concerns (don't refugees want to stay close to their homelands?). Regarding national security, the fact is that not a single refugee who has been resettled in the United States since 1980, the start of the U.S. refugee admissions program, has taken the life of an American in a terrorist attack. The Cato Institute found that the chances of being killed by a refugee in a terrorist attack are 1 in 3.64 billion, less likely than any of us being killed in a lightning strike. National security and compassion are not mutually exclusive. We can and have done both in our nation's history.

In regards to the economic impact, the Department of Health and Human Services found that over the past decade, refugees provided \$63 billion more in government revenue than they cost. There are many employers who believe refugees are their best employees and eagerly await the arrival of these newest Americans. Lastly, regarding the humanitarian concerns, while many refugees do want to return home, the reality is that many cannot and instead often live in decades in deplorable, insecure locations in developing countries. The less than 1 percent of the world's refugees that are resettled to the United States are the most vulnerable, and many are grateful to start their lives anew in place of security and freedom.

But for Christians, there is a greater consideration in how we relate to our neighbors and use our voice to speak into government policies. Fearing others of a different race or religion and wanting to shut the door on migrants can be a common, worldly response to living in a rapidly changing society, but for followers of Christ, fear should never be the primary motivating factor. Acts 17 describes how God's hand is in the movement of people, and He often moves people so that they can encounter Him for the very first time.

As my friend Gabriel Salguero said, the antidote to fear is not courage, it's love. It's getting close to the very thing that instills fear in us in which love for the other can be cultivated. Building relationships with our immigrant neighbors is not just an opportunity to fulfill the Great Commission to reach the nations for Christ but an opportunity to carry out the Great Commandment: to love our neighbors unconditionally. It's also an opportunity for mutual transformation as Hebrews 12 reminds us, as much as we give and serve, we can receive so much more through these relationships. Matthew 25 reminds us that when we welcome immigrants, we are welcoming Jesus Himself. Any time strictly utilitarian arguments are used to dehumanize immigrants, rob them of their fundamental human rights or separate them from their families, we stand on slippery moral grounds.

The United States does not have to admit everyone who wants to come to the country, but historic norms for global leadership, a common respect and understanding of human rights, and our own foreign policy and national security considerations should guide our response to be more generous and welcoming than we have been. When separating families seeking asylum or deporting individuals who have lived in the United States for decades with no criminal records

means family brokenness and even death, let's not as Christians espouse that these are the values that represent our faith. In how we love and serve our immigrant neighbors, and in how we speak about others and interact with our government officials to push for just laws and policies, we have much to lose and much to gain.