

THE WEEK

Will evangelicals thwart Trump's unchristian refugee ban?

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That the Trump administration is considering effectively barring all refugees from entering the United States in 2020 should shock but not surprise. Admissions were capped at just 30,000 for 2019, down from 45,000 the year before, during which only about 22,000 refugees were actually allowed to come to America. Senior White House adviser Stephen Miller has reportedly made gutting the State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration a personal mission, and he seems to be equal to the task.

There are all sorts of reasons this should not happen. The primary argument advanced by its supporters — that terrorists will slip in among the truly helpless and harm Americans — is statistically a load of bunk: "The chance of being killed on U.S. soil in a terrorist attack committed by a refugee [from 1975 to 2017] was 1 in 3.86 billion a year," a recent Cato Institute analysis reports. Logistical concerns are unfounded, too: If there is a lack of capability or resource to handle refugee resettlement in America, it is because the Trump administration's stranglehold on refugee admissions has strangled the nonprofit network serving refugees, too. Stop killing the one and the other will revive.

But if the zero admissions plan is averted, its undoing is unlikely to be such factual considerations. The best hope here may well be for the president's evangelical supporters to demand his compassion.

This may sound like a long shot, and that's because it is. Earlier this month, white evangelicals' views of refugees came under fresh scrutiny as a 2018 Pew Research poll recirculated on Twitter. Asked whether the United States has a responsibility to accept refugees, white evangelicals were disproportionately likely to say no. The religiously unaffiliated (65 percent), black Protestants (63 percent), Catholics (50 percent), and white mainline Protestants (43 percent) all outpaced white evangelicals' 25 percent identification of a responsibility to admit the displaced.

Survey results like these may feel predictable if your main exposure to white evangelicals is in the political arena, and particularly the 2016 election, when eight in 10 white voters who self-identified as evangelical Christians voted for President Trump, many citing immigration policy as a top rationale. (There are arguments of varying weight for taking that figure with a grain of salt, but even if we allow them all, the support Trump claimed in this demographic is remarkable.) Yet if, like me, you grew up in evangelicalism, this is a hard figure to face. It does not fit the faith I learned.

And I'm not the only child of evangelicalism to see this disconnect. Since 2016, "I have seen as the people who taught me to 'go out into all the world and preach the gospel' really couldn't care less about our humanitarian and moral and ethical obligation to the people experiencing a global refugee crisis," D.L. Mayfield, author of *Assimilate or Go Home: Notes from a Failed Missionary on Rediscovering Faith*, told me via email.

Mayfield has lived and worked within refugee communities, primarily in Minneapolis and Portland, Oregon, for a decade and a half. She specializes in teaching English to non-literate learners, and she writes about her experiences with refugees for an evangelical audience that seems to have forgotten the very lessons it once taught her. "What I thought was a religion with a large ethical framework now seems irrevocably enmeshed with American values such as individualism, safety, and religious liberty (for them)," Mayfield added. "The past few years have felt like one long betrayal as most of the evangelical community I come from have turned their backs on what I thought was the central tenet of our faith: to love God by loving our neighbors, both local and global."

The painful incongruity Mayfield perceives is historically discrepant, too. Proto-evangelical in the 18th and 19th centuries advocated care for refugees, notes Liberty University professor Karen Swallow Prior. Now, she says, "[i]t's almost like a reversal, where evangelicals have to relearn our own history, and embrace it, and learn from our forebears."

Also available to facilitate this learning are plenty of evangelicals' present-day leaders and institutions, which remain committed to helping refugees even as many in the rank and file (along with some high-profile voices like Jerry Falwell, Jr., also of Liberty University) do not. Christian humanitarian and refugee resettlement agency World Relief, for example, issued a swift and severe condemnation of the zero admissions plan, urging the administration to increase its admissions cap to 95,000 next year. Likewise, some recent polling shows evangelical pastors are increasingly likely to say Christians have an obligation to help immigrants.

But will white evangelicals at large follow that lead? I desperately want to say yes, but I don't think I can. A 2015 survey by LifeWay Research found social interactions and the media outranked national Christian leaders, the local church, and even the Bible as top influencers of evangelicals' thinking on immigration. Whatever the cause and nature of that break — and examining it is far beyond the scope of this piece — it means institutional evangelicalism's sense of obligation to the refugee has either dried up at the grassroots level or never trickled down to it in the first place.

Still, this institutional infrastructure remains, and that evangelical leaders and organizations may not accurately represent the views of the average self-identified evangelical voter is not always evident to the outside observer. (Whatever his claims of faith, Trump is certainly that.) So, in a sense, it could be that evangelicalism succeeds in thwarting this morally grotesque proposal of zero refugee admissions. But the evangelicalism thus in action would be less the movement as it is now than a fading shade of the best of evangelicalism past.