

Concept Paper on Immigration
Moving Immigration Reform Forward
June 30, 2009

Americans generally recognize that the immigration system is broken, unfair, and in urgent need of reform. We respect the rule of law, but our immigration laws as currently constituted do not fit the reality of our communities and our nation. No one – not businessmen, immigrants, policymakers – finds the law to be a coherent guide to the complex questions our communities face. The outdated immigration system denies an orderly process for immigrants to enter legally or legalize their situation, and deprives communities from tapping the talents and potential of valuable contributors to our society and economy. Federal politicians have been ignoring reality, making the situation worse, especially at the local level. We have forgotten what our faith traditions teach us: to welcome the stranger.

Arizona is ground zero for our nation’s broken immigration policies, and continues to pay the price for federal inaction and misguided public policy. The Immigration and Customs Enforcement’s 287g contracts with local law enforcement officials such as Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio transfers inappropriate levels of authority to local law enforcement officers, who are deputized to act as immigration enforcement officers, but without adequate safeguards. Opportunistic, rogue officials build their careers on the fears and mistrust festering in our community, using the 287g to conduct destructive “sweeps” that destroy our peace, and tear apart our families and the social fabric of our communities. Some state legislators continue to scapegoat immigrants with further nativist legislation to distract from the real issues facing our state. These pressing issues – our mortgage foreclosure crisis and deep recession – have been exacerbated by the Employer Sanctions Law, which went into effect Jan. 1, 2008, and has left thousands of immigrants jobless and forced many to leave Arizona for more hospitable working environments.

Demographics and Economics

The xenophobia that nativist politicians exploit may have racist tones; however, reactions against immigrants may have more to do with economics than race. As Benjamin Friedman points out, “in the face of economic stagnation, the desire to turn back the clock and the tendency to seek out scapegoats are all too familiar.”¹ Despite soaring GDP and economic indicators over the past thirty years, middle-class Americans have not seen the benefits. Productivity gains have gone into the pockets of Wall Street financiers, while most Americans’ incomes have stagnated. As the increasingly precarious middle-class has been exposed to great financial risks, the social safety net has eroded underneath them, leaving them with little economic security when Wall Street tanked the economy. When people see their economic prospects evaporating, they often become defensive. Out of fear of scarcity, we hoard what we have, and view immigrants as a threat to prosperity.

The United States is a country of immigrants. Our nation was founded on a Covenantal understanding of community: in the Constitution, we agreed to unite together, as immigrants

¹ Benjamin Friedman, The Moral Consequences of Economic Growth (New York; Vintage, 2006), 128.

from many nations, under one flag, one God, for the common good of all. Although America has prospered from the labor and creativity of immigrants, in recent decades we have forgotten our roots and failed to welcome the strangers among us through a fair, humane, and practical approach to immigration reform.

Yet the nation needs immigrants. The demographic shift now underway ties our nation's future prosperity to immigration. Our native-born workforce is declining precisely as our baby boom generation is poised to retire. Home to a large population of retirees, Arizona is in the forefront of this huge demographic shift. By 2030, 25% of Arizonans will be over 65, leaving only 2 workers supporting the social security costs of a retiree.

Many of these workers will be the children of immigrants. Unless education policies change in the state to encourage the academic advancement of these students, this new generation may be gravely unprepared to enter the labor force with the skills necessary to replace the highly skilled boomers.

Moreover, more immigrants, not fewer, will be needed just to replace the retirees and buy their homes. The U.S. Census shows a 5% increase in the number of workers, or 15.6 million people, will be needed in 2015 to maintain the ratio of workers to total population that existed in 2001. American firms already recruit skilled workers from around the globe because of the lack of professionals in these fields in the US. Instead of viewing immigrants as a threat, boomers in particular should see how their interests converge with those of immigrants. In his book, Immigrants and Boomers, Dowell Myers calls for an "intergenerational social contract"² that would span ethnic-racial groups as well as native-born and immigrant population in a forward looking agreement that recognizes the opportunities inherent in welcoming the immigrant. With their work ethic, family values and faith traditions, and quick assimilation into American society, the estimated 12 million undocumented immigrants who live here already are an underdeveloped resource, and should be integrated, not driven out.

In many respects, the story we choose to tell about immigration – one of fear and scarcity or one of hope and abundance – goes back to our roots as a covenantal society. Walter Brueggemann reminds us that "the power of the future is not in the hands of those who believe in scarcity and monopolize the world's resources; it is in the hands of those who trust God's abundance."³ If we trust in that abundance, and in the future of America, we should move toward tolerance and fairness, and reform our immigration system accordingly.

To reach comprehensive immigration reform will require real conversations, based on genuine reflection and a celebration of our diversity, both in our institutions and the public square.

² Dowell Myers, Immigrants and Boomers: Forging a New Social Contract for the Future of America (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2007), 8.

³ Walter Brueggemann, "The Liturgy of Abundance" (Christian Century, March 24-31, 1999), 343.