Testimony of

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Mr. Chairman, members of the committee: There is no more important, difficult task than defining the American community, and determining how we treat those who wish to join it. This work has many economic and national security implications. I believe that a relatively open immigration system ultimately is good for the economy - though it causes dislocations that must be addressed. I believe that an orderly guest worker system would make it easier to have an orderly border.

But the debate on immigration is not merely utilitarian - not just a matter of costs and benefits. It also concerns our deepest values as a people - values often informed by faith.

Concerning one issue in particular, those values are urgently needed. Sometimes the real passion in the immigration debate is not economic but cultural - a fear that American unity and identity are being diluted by Latino migration. Samuel Huntington of Harvard has claimed that Mexican migration compromises the "core" of American cultural identity - which he calls "a protestant society." During the last immigration debate, this charge took cruder forms, with some commentators warning that immigration reform would "erase America." And this argument, on the fringes, has sometimes become a cover for raw bigotry - with Hispanics called "leeches," "the world's lowest primitives" and carriers of "the fajita flu."

On this matter, religious people have no choice but to speak - because these arguments are entirely false, inconsistent with the teachings of faith, and destructive to American ideals.

First, you are forced to speak when your neighbors are libeled. It is true that Latinos, in some ways, are different from mainstream culture. Higher percentages attend church regularly. Higher percentages of Latin immigrants are married; lower percentages are divorced. These differences hardly threaten our unity or identity. Every new immigrant group has challenges. But Latinos - including illegal immigrants - often display values emblematic of America, risking much for the sake of economic and political freedom. They make our country more, not less, American.

Second, people of faith believe that the image of God is universal and uniform - that a passport or a Green Card does not confer human worth and dignity. It is a principle that forbids dismissive abstractions. No one is an "illegal" - they are human beings with stories and struggles. Every "alien" is also a neighbor. This concern for individual dignity requires the making of certain moral distinctions. People of faith affirm the importance of the rule of law. But the law is made for human beings, not human beings for the law. A young woman who dies in the desert during a perilous crossing for the dream of living in America is not the moral equivalent of a drug dealer. And millions of hardworking, religious, family-oriented neighbors make unlikely "criminals." The biblical tradition teaches a positive duty to care for the stranger in our midst. Christian ministries provide help to anyone, whatever their legal status - because if righteousness were a

requirement for mercy, none of us would deserve or receive mercy. And it is a great theme of the biblical story that God's purposes are often fulfilled through refugees - in Egypt, in the wilderness, in Babylon, in the flight from Herod, in the temporary, troubled kingdoms of this world.

These beliefs do not translate simplistically into open borders and amnesty. They do mean, however, that immigrants should never be used as objects of organized anger or singled out for prejudice and harm.

Finally, the argument for national unity based on birth and background is inconsistent with the American ideal - and ideal informed by a belief in God-given, universal rights. The "core" of American identify is not cultural purity, it is social mobility and shared principles. This model of unity has done better than any other - even after the massive, forced migration of slavery. It is certainly equal to this moment.

Thank you all.