

**Statement of Leith Anderson
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**Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration, Border Security and
Refugees**

**Hearing on Faith Based Community Perspectives
on Comprehensive Immigration Reform**

Thursday, October 8, 2009

Thank you Chairman Schumer and distinguished members of this subcommittee for the opportunity to speak on desperately needed reform of our nation's immigration policies and practices.

I have the privilege of serving as President of the National Association of Evangelicals, a network of 40 denominations comprising more than 45,000 local churches located in every congressional district and every state. The NAE membership also includes evangelical universities, seminaries, ministries, local congregations, and individuals. I also serve as Senior Pastor of Wooddale Church in Eden Prairie, MN, a diverse congregation of committed Christ-followers.

Evangelical churches have long reached out to both established and newly arriving immigrant populations. Our fastest growing churches are found in immigrant communities. In some of our denominations more than half of the congregations have substantial numbers of immigrant members.

There are no immigration or citizenship requirements for membership in our churches. Our churches embrace the biblical invitation: "Whoever is thirsty, let them come; and whoever wishes, let them take the free gift of the water of life." (Revelation 22:17) We believe, with St. Paul, that "God does not show favoritism." (Romans 2:11) Our churches are open to all who seek God's grace and mercy, regardless of their immigration status. And that is as it should be.

Does this mean that evangelicals do not recognize the right and responsibility of nations to regulate their borders? Far from it. Evangelicals believe that government is a gift of God for the common good. Borders are necessary for public order. We support intelligent enforcement of our

nation's immigration laws as long as the enforcement measures are consistent with respect for human dignity, family values and the sanctity of human life.

Our nation has been renewed throughout its history by successive waves of immigrants who arrive filled with hope, optimism, and a willingness to sacrifice and work hard to achieve the American dream. These virtues are found in all lands, but they are overrepresented among those who are enterprising and energetic enough to uproot themselves and travel long distances in order to rebuild their lives in a new land of opportunity. Others have come as refugees, people with the strength to stand up for what they believe, people with the courage of their convictions. Most of our churches were founded by these immigrants, or their immediate descendants.

Today's immigrants are a diverse group, but most of them are strongly committed to family values. Evangelicals believe the family is the basic and indispensable building block of society. Our nation has been built by strong families, but today the American family is in deep trouble. Immigrants often model for us forgotten truths about the importance of love, commitment and mutual support within the family.

If we are true to our deepest values, our immigration policies must prioritize the incomparable value of family. The current backlog in family reunification petitions, with waiting periods stretching into years and even decades, is shortsighted, and immoral. It causes much suffering, and tempts desperate people to work around our laws, where our system offers no realistic possibilities for timely family reunion.

Evangelicals do not condone law breaking. In fact, evangelicals recognize that all human beings have broken God's laws, and need God's grace, mercy and forgiveness. Jesus taught that those who are forgiven must in turn be willing to forgive others (Matthew 6:14-15). Laws must serve the good of society and create law and order; when they do not, they need to be changed. We believe that undocumented immigrants who have otherwise been law abiding members of our communities should be offered the opportunity to pay any taxes or penalties owed, and over time earn the right to become U.S. citizens and permanent residents. The process of redemption and restitution is core to Christian beliefs, as we were all once lost and redeemed through love of Jesus Christ.

As churches already deeply engaged in immigrant communities throughout this country, we stand ready to assist in this process. Following the passage of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, many of our member denominations, working in partnership with our humanitarian arm, World Relief, founded Houses of Hope which assisted immigrants with status petitions, English lessons, and civics instruction. More than 100,000 immigrants were helped to become fully accepted and contributing members of our communities. Evangelicals were ready to assist then and are ready to assist now in welcoming and helping to integrate the newest members of our society.

While welcoming immigrants and embracing newcomers to our communities often brings out the best in us, we recognize that a poorly administered immigration program can also stir up fear and hostility. Some Americans fear the prospect of additional competition for jobs. Some local communities are disproportionately impacted by our national policies. They deserve special attention and assistance.

America's social problems—unemployment, poverty, crime, substance abuse, family breakup--were not caused by immigrants. The solution is not to exclude immigrants, but to intelligently integrate them. Immigrants bring many assets and are eager to contribute to rebuilding our communities. We need to address the needs of the poor—whether immigrant or native born—with both justice and compassion.

There are in fact legitimate concerns about unscrupulous employers who exploit immigrants while unfairly competing with those who try to play by the rules. Many employers, however, want to do what is right but find our current system confusing and unworkable. In effect, we have a large sign at our border which says “Keep Out” while a few miles inland there is another, much larger sign which says “Help Wanted”. It is right to ask American employers to hire those who are already here; but in today's globalized labor market there must also be a workable system for employers to be able to legally hire the help that they need. In many cases there is a stark choice between importing workers and exporting jobs.

Immigration is not only about securing the borders, which is an important part of immigration policy and practice. It is not only about jobs, collecting taxes, earning citizenship, uniting families and reducing years of waiting. When we talk about immigration, we are talking about fellow human beings

who are pursuing the same dreams that many of us have. A family lives near me and faces a frightening dilemma. They are in our country legally. She is an immigrant from Africa who is now an American citizen. Her son came as a young child and has grown up in American culture, schools and language. However, he will graduate from high school soon and will celebrate his eighteenth birthday when his status will change and he must return to Africa. He has no friends, family, home, job or language skills in the country of his birth. There must be a better way.

Why is immigration policy important to evangelicals? Certainly because we believe what the Bible teaches about treatment of "aliens in the land." It is also because so many Hispanic, African and Asian immigrants are evangelical Christians who are in our denominations and churches by the millions. They are us.

As we begin a new national conversation on reforming our immigration policies, evangelicals offer you a pledge of civility and humility in public discourse. We recognize that the issues are complex, and that any policy changes may have unintended consequences. When you conduct town hall meetings on immigration reform in your home states, we look forward to an honest, intelligent and respectful dialogue. We ask you to model civility in your deliberations in the Congress, and in the media. We ask you to work in a bipartisan manner to enact urgently needed reforms, for the sake of the immigrants among us, and for the health of the nation.