

Testimony of
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Thank you Chairman Schumer, distinguished members of the subcommittee, esteemed colleagues on this panel, and other guests, for providing me an opportunity to speak on the moral and religious reasons for immigration reform.

I am a one of hundreds of thousands of local religious leaders in this country. I have been a pastor for almost 40 years and that is what I want to be in all my years remaining.

Even though I am also in leadership positions of national and international groups that are dealing with immigration, it is at the local level that I am continually reminded that policy truly does hurt or help people.

In my faith tradition we all start as strangers and aliens, outsiders to the commonwealth of God. But because we have a God who was willing to do what it took to include us (at great personal cost), we "are no longer strangers and aliens, but [we] are fellow citizens..." (Ephesians 2:18-19a)

So I find it a high honor to speak to those in power as an advocate for those who have no power. In a verse that would be echoed in many religions, Proverbs 31:8 commands us to "Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves."
"You will make known to me the path of life..." (Psalm 16:11)

The hope of any religion is that those who have been on the wrong path can be set upon the right path. The need for Comprehensive Immigration Reform is to create a path that will help people do the right thing. A broken system produces a dysfunctional society, fractured families, and it increases the vulnerability of both legal and illegal residents. It helps criminals who thrive in the shadows and it harms decent people, consigning them to a life of insecurity, hiding, and minimal contribution to the general welfare.

A broken system produces both broken and crooked people. The cost to our nation in terms of productivity, national unity, and national security is depressing. But it does not compare to the damage being done to individuals and families.

A broken system tempts many to predatory practices. I cannot count the stories I have heard about attorneys taking the entire life savings of undocumented workers, producing no results, then abandoning those workers when the money was gone. Is that typical of the profession? We

would not believe so. But "lead me not into temptation." It is a mighty temptation to de-prioritize those who are desperate and too intimidated to raise their voices to complain. And what about employers that take advantage of the powerless because there is no system of accountability?

Or the bureaucrats that have no incentive to produce results (or even to keep track of the paperwork) because, who will know? Or the talk show hosts that increase their fame and fortune by picturing those without the proper papers only as conniving and dangerous parasites instead of persons made in the image of God, deserving both respect and help to do the right thing? We are producing cottage industries of exploitation. We are also hearing millions of stories that are the opposite of the American dream.

My friend Rev. Silas Pintos tells of a family in his Hispanic congregation that came from England. Both the husband and wife were successful business people, and they hoped that in the U.S. their children would be immersed in a better environment for family values. So they came to start an alternative energy company. After a two-year ordeal with the immigration system and absurd legal fees, the immigration department could not even clearly explain to them why their residency application had not gone through. They returned to England emotionally and financially devastated.

My friend Imam Mohammed Musri told me the wife of a 60 year old man in his congregation was very sick. The man had papers but when the attorney handling his case took a judgeship, the man was not told he needed to re-register. He was deported even though his wife was too sick to go with him. She was hospitalized and died without him because he could not get back into the country to be by her side.

Pastor Augustine Davies is on the staff at my church. He and his wife are from Sierra Leone and have just completed the long and arduous task of becoming citizens, but they have special relationships with many of the Africans inside and outside our congregation who are caught in the system. One of them is George.

George is from Liberia, West Africa. He is married and has four adult children who live in poverty back in his home country. When George arrived, INS approved the refugee for TPS. George completed a nursing program and got a job. He was turned down for TPS 3 renewal, but now George feels the almost crushing pressure of providing for his family and other countrymen who need the money he can send them because of his job. He stays in the shadows for now. I do not agree with what he is doing, but I know his present life is because he loves his family, not because he is out for himself.

Our immigration system can also intimidate congregations as well as individuals and families. My friend Rabbi Steven Engel told me that his congregation had sponsored a family from Argentina to come to the U.S. The INS lost the paperwork many times, and they made regular visits to the synagogue, suspicious that the congregation might be doing something wrong. The whole process was so stressful and unwelcoming that when Sergio died from a heart attack at the age of 43 the remaining family returned to Argentina.

These stories and many others don't live up to the ideals of our country. We can do better, and we know it. Everyone is frustrated with the present system. Our immigration system in many cases has us echoing the words of the despairing saint who proclaimed,

"I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate."
(Romans 7:15)

The urgency for immigration reform that yields efficiency and compassion cannot be overstated because it is so overdue.

The Moral Principles for a better system

Some of the central principles that comprise most major religions are also woven into our country's history and can be used as a standard for immigration reform:

These principles deem each person as valuable, "endowed by their Creator" with a dignity that transcends earthly circumstance. Therefore, our system must treat each person respectfully.

They acknowledge the family as the bedrock of personal and social development, and the support of the family as the foundation of a strong society. Therefore, our system should prioritize the family.

They see law as not only necessary for restraining evil, but as needed for structuring healthy relationships. It is right that wrongdoers are restrained and/or punished, but it is a better justice when the laws yield correction and the redemption of bad circumstances.

Therefore, our system should have ways to choose to live upright lives after the penalties for wrong decisions. So most people of faith are hoping for policies that will prioritize family togetherness, respect for the law, personal productivity, and compassion for those who are most helpless.

Conclusion

We do not envy you your charge. Immigration reform is a morally complex as well as a politically explosive challenge. But many of us are praying earnestly for you and for God's wisdom in this matter.

Including the stranger is not just a matter of compassion but a necessity for greatness.

Loving your neighbor as you love yourself is not only a moral commandment but a path to national nobility, if we can build a nation of families and support networks that not only help the marginalized to be successful, but help the successful to be helpful, then we can better live up to our potential as a people.

In the end, I believe our nation will be not be judged by the productivity of our budgets, or the genius of our laws, or even the earnestness of our faith communities. We will be judged, both by history and by God, by the way we treated people, especially those who needed our help.