

We Can Approach Mexican Immigration With Compassion and Reason

As we enter the dawn of a new era in Washington, one of the hot-button issues in the 2016 election season and ensuing legislation is the hot-potato issue called “Immigration,” especially as it relates to Mexico. While the pundits would have us draw a line in the sand between Republican and Democrat, conservative and liberal, there are bi-partisan solutions that aren’t defined or confined by these titles. When it came to the issue of borders and immigration, God was seldom silent, and never political, a position the churches of America should consider. There are some basic issues at work in this discussion, and if we can shed the talking points of the polar-opposite positions, I think we can objectively look at the facts and the issues with eyes, minds and hearts wide open to finding a better way forward.

At the heart of the issue, to my way of thinking, are five basic issues:

1. Adding value and respect for the nation of Mexico and Mexicans
2. Legal immigration
3. Illegal immigration
4. People who are here illegally
5. Children of those who are here illegally

To start the conversation, I am going to flip the script a bit and start with No. 5:

Adding value and respect for the nation of Mexico and Mexicans

Despite being from an impoverished country with a history of government corruption and drug wars, Mexicans are a very proud

and resilient people. In every campus we have, there are many from Latin America, with the greatest number from Mexico, and in that mix are first-generation, second-generation and even third-generation immigrants. They are a passionate people who place a high value on family and doing life with family. There is so much we can learn from them, and the value they add to our churches is immeasurable. To even have a discussion related to Mexican immigration, it must, and I mean must, begin with respect and admiration for Mexico and the Mexican people. I can't imagine our churches on either coast without them.

Legal Immigration

Whatever your stance may be on the wall designed to keep people out, most of the people I know and represent are all for building a bridge that allows a fair and safe and timely process for legal immigration. One of the greatest contributors to the illegal immigration issue is the lengthy, impractical, under-staffed, unsafe current process laced with red tape and inefficiency. If you are starving or not able to provide a decent education or medical care for your family, waiting for a bureaucratic process is not a viable option. Add to that a complicated paperwork process and the time you would have to take away from work to see it through, and you have a recipe for people to feel as though the laws were not written with their welfare in mind.

But even with all these walls, thousands walk through this process step by step and legitimately wait their turn to immigrate legally and without impunity. In fact, many times, the most vocal group of people opposing illegal immigration are those who have either paid the heavy price and legally immigrated or those who are in the process, waiting in line to take their turn. The system and the process simply must be streamlined and staffed appropriately, or you will never solve the problem of people skirting the law altogether—wall or no wall.

Illegal Immigration

I think the No. 1 issue for many Americans in this century is safety. As a pastor, I have two concerns when it comes to safety. First, I believe the No. 1 responsibility of our government is to keep us safe, not from the law-abiding Mexican people, but from other elements from throughout the world who have pledged to do us harm. Most in the law-enforcement and border patrol agencies believe current practices and processes on our southern border simply are inadequate to this task. Second, the risks a family takes to make this border crossing are riddled with health risks, scams, and criminal elements, and sometimes to the most innocent: children.

Any discussion about legal or illegal immigration must begin with a basic respect for the dignity of other human beings, and especially for those less fortunate than us. When we label any human being or set of human beings with titles that are degrading or designed to disparage, we create animosity and polarize the nation. These are human beings, and the church is not in the law-enforcement business. We are in the “loving our neighbors as ourselves” business and the Old Testament is filled with references for how God’s people are to treat and even provide for “aliens.” This doesn’t mean that. I think one of the most frustrating issues surrounding the immigration issue for those in the conservative camp, would be that somehow, someone, somewhere decided not only to not enforce the laws that are on our books, but to even confuse and handcuff those in the law-enforcement community when it comes to enforcement. And the concept of a “sanctuary city” sounds more like anarchy than a humanitarian effort. Add to that the political motivation for one party to add to their voter rolls, and you have a perfect storm for a stand-off.

The question that I have to ask as a pastor is who decides which laws we enforce, and which ones do we not enforce? Should any government official, at any level, be allowed to

decide not to enforce a law? Should an individual's personal or party political or social values allow that mayor, or governor, or district court judge, or attorney general or even a president to decide which laws are enforced and which ones are ignored when there are systems and legal processes that are designed to change those same laws?

People Who Are Here Illegally

This is one of the toughest topics to discuss when illegal immigration is the topic of discussion. Is it really our intent to tear families apart and put people on buses and send 11 million people back to Mexico, knowing they will be walking back into the poverty they worked so hard to escape? While on the other hand, what do you say to the thousands who have followed the laws—our laws, and are patiently waiting their turn for legal access? Clearly undocumented participants in our society are at a great disadvantage, as is each state who provides services for them. This is a tough one.

I do not think you will find a person who is willing to have an objective conversation who feels it is possible to even consider deporting over 11 million people, as well as deal with the humanitarian consequences that would ensue. Then there is the civil unrest that will come from every corner and culture of the country. Nothing would divide this country more at a time when racial divide is a near national crisis.

Ronald Reagan, through an executive order, declared amnesty for over three million residents as well as their spouses and children who were already here. The thought was that if they are already living here, working here and a part of our society, then to not have documentation and subject them to the same laws and taxation requirements as the rest of the U.S. actually put the U.S. at a disadvantage, and that we were less safe leaving them “undocumented.” And today, these families have fully assimilated.

All the arguments that support this theory are still valid in 2016, the only difference is that now there are over 11 million as opposed to the three million who were granted amnesty under Reagan. The greatest fear of those opposed to this notion is that these will also become voting citizens and vote en masse for the Democratic party, a valid concern for half of the country. But it would seem that there is a better approach that makes sense.

In short, one viable proposal would be to grant a path to legal status for the 11 million undocumented U.S. residents by granting "Documented Status." This would allow them to document, receive a Social Security Number, pay income tax and property tax, and have all of the rights afforded everyone else with the following three caveats: No. 1, to be granted documented status, you will have to pay a fine/assessment of \$10,000 over a 10-year period for skirting the legal immigration process (which rewards those who have waited their turn legally). No. 2, they cannot vote unless they return to their country and go through the same immigration processes required by current and future laws. No. 3, citizenship would be granted to those who serve eight or more years in our military. Dignity, respect, fairness and safety should be the hallmarks of any comprehensive immigration plan.

The Dream Act

The Dream Act is an American legislative proposal for the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors. This is a multi-phase process for undocumented immigrants in the U.S. that would first grant conditional residency and (for those who meet further qualifications), permanent residency. It has come up for a vote in the legislature several times and has been voted down each time. To qualify to be a DREAM candidate, a student would have had to be living in the U.S. since before they turned 16 continuously and have graduated from a U.S. high school or received a GED and pass a criminal background check. For the record, this is very different than what has

been referred to as an “anchor baby,” which is a child who was born in the U.S. to parents who are considered here illegally.

We hear all of the arguments about the universities and colleges that are already filled to capacity, especially in California, and this is a valid issue. It is also disheartening to hear that the university academic and administrative community has decided unilaterally to ignore laws and admit and even grant financial assistance to students who are not legal citizens, many times displacing thousands of students who are U.S. citizens for that same aid. I say this not out of a meanness or a desire to keep a student from further education but rather because it is another example of entities simply choosing to violate laws that exist without any fear of impunity from a government that turns a blind eye out of political ideology.

One thing to consider related to this topic is one that is never discussed in the media or even in conversations or debates is that in granting this special status, we are also robbing the nation of Mexico of its greatest natural resource—her people—the best and the brightest. Additionally, it would seem that by allowing students who are here any time before their 16th birthday would incentivize the illegal crossing of minors and create a very unsafe situation.

One viable proposal would be to grant a path to legal status for the undocumented U.S. students of any age by granting “Documented Status.” This would allow them to document, receive a Social Security number, pay income tax when they start working and have all of the rights afforded everyone else, with the following caveats: They cannot vote unless they return to their country and go through the same immigration processes required by current and future laws. Second, citizenship would be granted to those who serve eight years or more in our military. Finally, no financial assistance or admittance to any college or university (a privilege, not a right) could be given until the student is documented.

Respect, Dignity, Safety and Fairness

In summary, you cannot begin to have a Christian conversation about immigration reform without love and respect for the dignity and humanitarian needs of the people of Latin America, and more specifically, Mexico. There are common-sense discussions possible that can result in solutions that benefit every person this issue affects when it is framed by respect, dignity, safety and fairness.

The greatest thing that could ever happen when it comes to the immigration reform issue would be for a non-partisan, non-government, empowered committee to make a formal and binding resolution and formal recommendation built on a foundation of respect, dignity, safety and fairness. To think that polar-opposite political parties and the many lobby groups they are beholding to will ever develop and pass rational and objective immigration policies is an irrational conclusion. What will end up happening if this non-partisan group is not impaneled, will be that at some point in time, policy that benefits one-half of the constituency and country will rule and reign, much to the peril of the other half. What a sad day that would be. Faith institutions from a wide array of religious constituencies must be at the table if the heart of God is ever to be a part of decisions that will affect millions of human beings.

There is currently a government office called the Office of Religion and Global Affairs that could serve as the government vehicle that could convene just such a task force and committee that would carry the weight necessary to propose actual policy recommendations that would be considered by the incoming administration.

Change is necessary. Change that has both compassion and reason is possible. That is exactly what I am praying for—as a citizen of the United States of America, as a pastor and as one who has been south of the border many times, stared abject

poverty in the face and held the children it has left orphaned. {eoa}

Dr. Rich Rogers is the editorial director of *Kingdom Connections* and author of *Next Level Living* and *Next Level Parenting*.