

Testimony of
James Tolle

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Written Testimony of

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Border Security and Refugees

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Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Mr. Cornyn and Members of the Committee, for the opportunity to appear before you today. I am extremely heartened by this meeting. The topic of immigration reform is a very important subject facing our country.

I appear before you today in my role as pastor of a Los Angeles, California congregation with approximately 20,000 members. I am also the past Director of Foursquare Missions, the denomination in which I serve, which has more than 50,000 affiliated churches. I also have recently stepped down from overseeing hundreds of Hispanic churches across our country.

In my present role as pastor, I am privileged to lead the Spanish-speaking services, as well as the English ones. The Spanish-speaking segment of our church has well over 10,000 members and is made up of nationals who have emigrated from every Spanish-speaking country in this hemisphere. They are industrious, creative, entrepreneurial and in many cases, scholarly. They are also model residents.

For the past five years it has been my privilege to visit congressional leaders of both parties as well as the DNC and RNC, seeking to see comprehensive immigration reform become law. Unfortunately, the legislation has never been passed. I pray today marks a new beginning.

The Consequences Can Be Easily Seen

The consequences of this failure are readily visible to people, like myself, who seek to serve society in response to Christ's command "to love your neighbor as yourself." Young Hispanic men and women, who would otherwise qualify, are having difficulty paying for college, as well as securing jobs due to their undocumented status. Having been brought from their parent's land

of origin as children, they have no official status, yet the only country they've really ever known is the United States.

These young men and women are caught in a legal paradox. In California and nine other states, laws are in place which give the undocumented student the opportunity to attend institutions of higher education if they can afford them. However, if they succeed in graduating from college, they cannot enter the legal workforce to put to use their skills, talents and abilities.

Approximately 40% of all undocumented students live in California. Children make up 15% or 1.8 million of the 12 million undocumented immigrants living in this country. The lack of a pathway to legalization only disheartens the student and in many cases contributes to an emerging subclass. According to statistics which I have seen, less than 10% of the undocumented students go on to college, while approximately 50% of resident or citizen Hispanics do so.

To illustrate the point, many of the Hispanic children in the congregation I pastor, who were born in this country, of immigrant parents, are succeeding. From our congregation we see them serving in the U.S. military, attending graduate schools, and working in congressional offices. They are pilots and school teachers, police officers and customs agents. Some are newscasters, college athletes, entertainers and small business owners. Those undocumented children mentioned earlier who were brought to this country as youngsters aren't as fortunate, but they're just as capable.

Other consequences are also evident. Without the passage of comprehensive immigration reform, legal Hispanic citizens are being questioned more often because of the color of their skin and the accent of their speech. On two occasions in the past year, immigration "roundups" were made at area businesses in the neighborhood adjacent to our church. These raids ruined years of excellent collaborative gains in the community as the Los Angeles Police, local Neighborhood Councils and the Clergy worked together. Among those taken were undocumented workers, as well as legal residents and citizens. They were all held while efforts to determine their status were being made. Unfortunately, the cherished value of "innocent until proven guilty" was slow in being applied.

Without immigration reform, criminals in the community also continue to take advantage of the undocumented immigrant. In my neighborhood, Hispanic immigrants are targets of extortion crimes because of their status. Threats of "turning in the immigrant" are routinely made. While there does not exist a true pathway to legalization, the criminal element will continue to prey upon the vulnerable.

Our History Encourages Us

In seeking comprehensive immigration reform, I am motivated by the phrase in the Declaration of Independence which states that "all men are created equal . . . with certain unalienable Rights." Unalienable rights are those human rights which transcend law and the preferences of other people.

Everyone agrees that federal misdemeanor laws have been broken by undocumented immigrants. However, the overwhelming majority of the undocumented Hispanic immigrant population in this country are law abiders. They are not criminals as many suggest. Their guilt is that of answering the "unalienable rights" voice embedded in their consciousness in much the same manner as the millions of Irish, Italian, German, Polish and countless other

peoples have done our rich history. Rather than having a careless disregard for the law, they have come to this country seeking provision, safety, and improvement of their situation in life. The safety the immigrant seeks is proof of their true appreciation for law, rather than the other way around.

In my opinion the rule of law which we wish to be upheld by incoming immigrants has just as equally been violated by different sectors of our society. Whether in the services industry, small and big business alike, or the individual who is looking for inexpensive household, garden, or construction help, arms have readily been opened wide to these same immigrants at lower wages than those earned by legal residents. I offer that the rule of law should not have these glaring contradictions.

Some Immediate Concerns

Millions of immigrants are unknown to the government. With the continuing lack of a comprehensive immigration package, many immigrants have little incentive to cooperate with the upcoming census. Should a sincere effort be made by Congress to push legislation forward, I am convinced we will achieve the most accurate census statistics in decades.

The local police departments which so often partner with those of us in the faith-based community need the passage of a definitive immigration law. Without a new law, much community policing is hindered. Because of immigration enforcement fears on the part of the undocumented, crimes go unreported and witnesses to crimes do not come forward.

By reforming immigration, much exploitation of workers will cease. Sub par wages, long hours, and illegal working conditions are realities among the undocumented in our country. By bringing the undocumented into the system, employers who take advantage of workers will not be able to continue, and truer market-place competition will ensue.

Many families are also in disarray because of the present-day immigration situation. As logical as it might have seemed at the time when decisions were made to require certain applicants for legal status to return back to their countries of origin for the finalization of their documents, few took notice of the fact that legal family members stayed behind in the United States, while the applicant - in many cases the primary wage earner - traveled to their country leaving behind the family with much less income, as well as the uncertainty of a return date.

Workforce Realities

Although we presently find ourselves in an economic downturn with pressing unemployment, workforce estimates for the future will require more workers than present numbers can support. Comprehensive immigration reform would solve this.

The Public Opinion Reality

With a Gallup poll showing well over 64% of those polled believing that immigration is good for America and with an additional 79% believing that the immigrant is working in a job which an American does not want, it is apparent Congress would have the support of the American people to enact comprehensive immigration reform.

Judeo-Christian Principles

As a faith leader, I have responded to the instructions of Scripture. They have formed my worldview on this subject. My pursuit of comprehensive immigration reform comes from Leviticus 19:34, which states, "The stranger who dwells with you shall be unto you just as one born among you, and you shall love him as yourself." The Prophet Malachi further admonishes every believer to not "turn away the alien", while Jesus, in Matthew 25:35, calls upon all who follow him to invite the stranger to come in. Jesus ultimately adds his confirmation to that of Isaiah's . . . that he was to "proclaim liberty" to all.

Although every generation has had its own set of challenges, those who have joined the great American journey have always sought to fulfill the spirit of the above beliefs with immigrants of their generation. It is my hope that our generation will make the hard moral decisions. Comprehensive immigration reform is the right moral decision. Our country has assimilated millions upon millions of immigrants over the centuries. We are a nation of immigrants. Why should we stop now?

A Suggestion

Because I believe the issue before us transcends any one group's ability to understand or solve, with utmost respect, I call upon this committee to appoint under its oversight, a non partisan national commission on immigration reform. I humbly suggest we unite the very best leaders from business, government, communities of faith, unions, education, law and health. This group's mandate would be to fashion a comprehensive immigration package for our future.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and Members of this Committee for the opportunity you have given me today to appear before you.

Respectfully submitted,

The Reverend James Tolle
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