

Understanding the Opposition to Justice for Immigrants **by Bill Mefford, Director, Civil and Human Rights,** **General Board of Church and Society, United Methodist Church**

One recent difference in the movement for just and humane immigration reform has been the emergence of predominantly Anglo Evangelical groups like the National Association of Evangelicals. The NAE are now joining mainline denominations like the United Methodist Church who have long stood for immigrants' rights, as support for just and humane reform spans the theological spectrum. The broad reforms sought by these groups include a pathway to citizenship for all undocumented immigrants, family reunification and protection of workers' rights.

Although they still have room to grow in their advocacy for the most vulnerable, groups like the NAE are slowly awakening to the realization what we as United Methodists have known for years: the issue of immigration is fundamentally a human rights issue. The unjust treatment of immigrants and their families has driven tens of thousands of people of faith to become politically engaged. They are doing so through prayer vigils, Neighbor-to-Neighbor meetings with members of Congress, Breaking-Bread-and-Barrier events and signing Holiday Postcards to Congress. The growing concern for issues that do not directly affect evangelicals has been long in coming, and while they still have a ways to go in their understanding and engagement in justice, their presence is certainly welcome.

The recent emergence of Anglo evangelicals into the faith movement for just and humane immigration reform has made them targets of anti-immigrant anger by an interesting partnership. Two factions have formed a tacit alliance to shut out immigrants from entering the United States. These factions are anti-immigrant groups and what I like to call, fundamentalist elites. They oppose just, humane immigration reform, and instead opt for enforcement-only strategies that have only driven up ineffective government spending and have fostered terror in immigrant communities.

Anti-immigrant groups and fundamentalist elites maintain goals that fit nicely together. The anti-immigrant groups, such as Numbers USA and FAIR (Federation for American Immigration Reform), want to pit ethnic groups and low-skilled workers against one another. Their goal is much more to protect the economic status quo, create a harsh backlash against immigrants, and guarantee continued marginalization for all ethnic groups and low-skilled workers.

Fundamentalist elite organizations claim to be biblical literalist in their interpretation of Scripture and to be renewal groups in the life of the church. They clearly have not read scripture though, as they fail to see the thousands of verses pertaining to God's passion to defend the vulnerable and to show hospitality for sojourners. They are much more reflective of fear-based culture than the call to holiness set to us in Scripture.

Unfortunately, these two types of groups emanate from a long and sad line of U.S. history featuring anti-immigrant sentiment. The Know-Nothing Party of the 1800s brought together Americans violently opposed to Irish and German immigrants. The Red Scare of 1919 was just that and it was directed towards Eastern European groups. These are just a couple of occurrences. Much of the impetus for these movements came from fundamentalist Christians who were anti-Catholic, anti-Semitic, and blatantly racist. They viewed the arrival of immigrants as an intrusion, and an attack on their rigid view of America "under God" as a White Anglo-Saxon Protestant nation.

Fundamentalists were once tied to evangelicals, but began to separate in the early twentieth century in part because of fundamentalists' reactions to the arrival of immigrants. Evangelicals are typically noted for their literal interpretation of scripture, maintaining a "born-again" experience, and engagement in the practice of personal evangelism, according to Christian Smith's description in *Christian America?*

Fundamentalists hold to these values as well. But they view increased global migration as an attack on America and God's plan to redeem the world through using the United States as an instrument of righteousness in the world. While evangelicals have tended to see increased migration as a missional opportunity, fundamentalists have reacted with fear. This fear has often led to a position of protectionism and exclusion.

Evangelicals, on the other hand, at times see their mission to redeem individuals in the world through a lens of ministry to the vulnerable. This has often led to paternalism and even cultural colonialism at times, but remains a far cry from the exclusion and protectionism embraced by fundamentalists. The emergence of fundamentalist elite organizations are the latest embodiment of the religious zealots who have embraced a triumphal mission approach to political engagement lifting up America more than God's Kingdom, and who demand that others abide by their rigid, doctrinaire ideologies.

While fundamentalists used to be what George Marsden called a loose "federation of co-belligerents united by their fierce opposition to modernist attempts to bring Christianity into line with modern thought." I describe this new embodiment as "fundamentalist elite organizations" because they have become highly organized, interconnected, affluent, and much more focused on gaining political influence.

Fundamentalists used to be more egalitarian in nature, focused on the spiritual realm, and located on the lower end of the socio-economic ladder. However, the recent structuring of fundamentalists into organizations and alliances have been characterized as extremely hierarchical, and patriarchal oftentimes, and very well-funded. In fact, their structure and funding have separated them from the people they pretend to represent, hence their status as elites.

And they are elitist in the worst sense of the word. They often target mainline denominations and now other groups like the NAE, that refuses to hold their rigid doctrines of exclusion and bigotry. These elitist organizations are no longer grassroots-oriented. They receive their funding from clandestine sources that have a historical, deep-rooted suspicion towards immigrants in the United States. For instance, in a recent panel on climate change in the Senate, the former head of the Institute for Religion and Democracy, Jim Tonkovich, refused to admit where funding for his organization came from when questioned by Senator Whitehouse from Rhode Island.

Thus, they have become natural companions to nativist groups.

One of these nativist groups is Numbers USA. This is a kinder, gentler anti-immigrant organization with extraordinarily close ties to a known racist, John Tanton, who wants to eliminate immigration entirely. The leader of Numbers USA is Roy Beck, a United Methodist. He has repeatedly attempted to intimidate religious groups from faithfully following scripture in defending immigrants and their families.

Fortunately, he has repeatedly failed.

Numbers USA and other nativists such as FAIR try to wedge groups against one another, such as American-born workers and immigrants. They claim to fight for American-born workers, but there is not a single piece of legislation that Numbers USA advocates for that is intended to benefit these workers. The truth is that they do not care for American-born workers, nor for immigrants. And they want to eliminate immigration altogether.

Groups like Numbers USA continue to be unsuccessful because they fail to understand that biblical justice is not achieved by pitting immigrants against low-skilled citizen workers. Biblical justice is best achieved when all groups work together to secure and protect human rights for themselves and others at the same time. As United Methodists and followers of Jesus, this is what we are committed to.

Numbers USA's most recent attempt to bully religious groups stems from its fear of the unprecedented grassroots political advocacy happening throughout the United States by faith communities, including many United Methodists. Even though he well knows that the Social Creed of the United Methodist Church was created in 1908 largely around issues of fair treatment in the workplace, Beck has even absurdly claimed that mainline religious leaders have declared "war" on the unemployed in the United States. He encouraged his followers to flood religious offices with calls opposing the view that reform should be about immigrants and their families.

I received two calls from this latest attack by Numbers USA. Both callers asked a precisely worded question of why the General Board of Church & Society was "against American workers and in favor of illegals?" I began to explain how this agency representing The United Methodist Church's official policies advocates for the right to unionize, to collectively bargain, for the development of jobs through appropriate green technology, and the right to a livable wage for all workers. We have historically advocated for the rights of workers.

As I tried to share this, both callers began to argue with me about what United Methodists advocate for on behalf of U.S. workers. The callers said they don't believe U.S. workers should have a livable wage or should be able to unionize or collectively bargain for higher wages or for safer working conditions. Both argued vehemently against these workers' rights, even though they had originally called to "defend" U.S. workers against us!

Why this hypocrisy? Numbers USA and its adherents do not care for workers, regardless of their legal status. Numbers USA does not believe low-skilled workers should be given a livable wage. And, we should perish any thought of preserving and defending human rights of low-paid workers, immigrant or otherwise.

Certain fundamentalist elite organizations regularly call for their membership to flood my office with calls and I regularly field their call for massive resistance against what we have been called by General Conference to advocate for, by answering at the most, one or two calls or emails. While Numbers USA can usually generate more action than this, the fundamentalist elitist organizations simply do not have any grassroots groups organized. This partly the cost they must pay for higher attention paid to extremist conservative funders than to grassroots. These fundamentalist elite organizations write attacking articles, but are unable to generate any real pressure. They are elitist and detached in the worst sense of the word.

In the end, this partnership of anti-immigrant groups and fundamentalist elites has been a continued historical and unfortunate occurrence. They seem to belong together. Neither nativist groups nor

fundamentalist elites understand that strength is attained through embracing change and diversity and building on that reality. The power of whites joining with other whites to defend "our society" is fading into a distant and unpleasant memory. Neither understands that fullness of life is discovered through relationships among people different and distinct from one another. Both project attitudes and advocate for defensive, protectionist policies that are self-defeatist in nature. Their stances are antithetical to the mission of the followers of Christ, who called his people to welcome all people, love all people and work for justice for all.

Other resources on fundamentalism you should read are

- *Christian America?* by Christian Smith
- *Revivalism & Social Reform* by Timothy Smith
- *The Great Reversal* by David Moberg

More information about Numbers USA and nativist is online at

http://www.splcenter.org/intel/nativist_numbersusa.jsp