

To: The editors of The Christian Century

RE: Dying To Get In (August 10, 2004)

I appreciate Rick Ufford-Chase's thoughtful and mostly careful way of describing the U.S. southern border situation. I especially like his reminding us that illegal immigration drains the brains, the brawn and the change agents from needy communities, leaving them as hopeless ghost towns. More than 4.5 billion people in the world are more impoverished than the average Mexican. We currently take around 2 million of that group each year as legal and illegal immigrants. That is one-half of one-tenth of 1% of the 4.5 billion. Whatever immigration and illegal migration is, it is not a humanitarian solution of any kind to the poverty of the world. The only place where 99% or more of the world's impoverished people have hope of finding improvements in their lives is in the countries where they now live (don't forget that the population of those super-poor countries is growing by around 80 million a year). Your article properly places the most important emphasis on making sure that our government's trade and other foreign policies do not make lives more difficult in the developing countries, and preferably that they improve the lives of the most desperately poor, hungry and diseased.

But Mr. Ufford-Chase's approach to handling the illegal immigration problem in this country displays the huge blind-side that most mainline church national leaders have on the immigration issue by promoting the idea that illegal immigration is a victimless crime.

While focusing on poor people in other countries who wish to break the law to get into this one, he ignores poor people and lower-middle-class people in this country for whom immigration laws are most clearly designed. The Supreme Court in the past has ruled that the chief reason for our immigration laws is to protect workers. Mr. Ufford-Chase does mention the issue of job displacement and quickly dismisses it. And then he brings up the issue of wage depression and speaks admiringly of Fed Chairman Greenspan's suggestion that we should have high immigration in order to hold down wages. I frankly am amazed to see Mr. Ufford-Chase think that is a worthy aim.

In fact, study after study of the last 160 years of U.S. economic history has found that high immigration nearly always is accompanied by wage depression and increased gaps of inequality. While it is true that most foreign workers – legal and illegal – improve their own economic situation by moving to the U.S., does the church not have any feelings of responsibility toward the American workers whose full-time wages don't break the poverty barrier or aren't enough above poverty to provide for lives of middle-class dignity? Is it our goal that those who work in agriculture forever receive poverty wages? That restaurant and hotel workers should be a peasant class? Not only does the largest sustained flow of legal and illegal immigration in the nation's history keep those occupations at the bottom, but it is contributing to the collapse of other occupations such as ones in construction and service. These are not imaginary concerns. Meatpacking jobs until the early 1980s were safe and among the best paid lower-skilled jobs in America providing for solid middle-class lives. Because of the ready availability of legal and illegal foreign labor, those jobs collapsed into the highest accident rate of any occupation, paying so little that many of the meatpacking families qualify for welfare. The same has happened with janitorial jobs in many cities. "Occupation Collapse" is a factor in most of the major social issues of the day, including the rise in the uninsured, inability to afford decent housing, the increase in the working-poor class and widening inequality. In nearly every collapsed occupation, you will find a disproportionate presence of foreign workers as a chief cause.

It is important to note that the above economic calamity has occurred under the current immigration system which many national church leaders claim is far too restrictive. Just think of the economic suffering that would be caused if the borders were further opened. It is important to note that the primary economic harm from illegal workers comes not because they are undocumented but because they disrupt the supply-demand balance in the labor market. Legal immigration today runs more than a million a year, around five times that of traditional averages before 1970. In addition, the government estimates that between 800,000 and a million new illegal aliens permanently settle in the U.S. each year. These numbers explain most of the population boom now devouring our farmland, natural habitat and open spaces – the largest population growth in U.S. history.

The answer to illegal immigration is not to make it legal but to make it clear that crime won't pay – won't pay for the illegal worker and won't pay for the illegal employer. We have to understand that people risk their lives to enter the U.S. illegally because the U.S. government has made the payoff so incredibly high. If a person dodges the Border Patrol and survives the journey, there isn't even a 1% chance that that person will ever have to leave the U.S. because the Clinton and Bush administrations virtually stopped prosecuting businesses that hire illegal workers, and because the two Administrations adopted policies so that almost no illegal aliens are ever deported unless they have committed a violent crime. It is not enforcement at the border but the NON-enforcement of immigration laws in the interior that kills people at the border. And it is the often-well-intended but thoughtless efforts of leaders and groups that cry out for amnesties that further incite poor people in other countries to leave their villages and risk their lives in hopes of winning the grandest lottery in the world, the chance to work U.S. jobs the rest of their lives.

Mr. Ufford-Chase's salute of Pres. Bush for wanting to "match willing workers with willing employers" misses the fact that that was the motto of the Robber Barons a century ago when they sent ships to Europe to import the labor that would break the strikes and impede the unions for decades before they finally truly took hold in the years following the 1924 great reduction in immigration numbers. We became a middle-class and significantly egalitarian society in the next 50 years of lowered immigration, a period called by economists the "Great Compression" because of the narrowing of income inequality which was one of the important building blocks that made possible the civil rights revolution of the 1950s and the peak power of unions.

Of course, I recognize that there are competing values and competing objects of humanitarian concerns in the immigration debate. How to balance them? Flooding this country with even more low-priced, low-skilled, low-educated foreign labor is the last thing we should want to do if we have any compassion for the most vulnerable members of our own community. But we should also have a compassionate way to deal with those foreign workers who have illegally moved to this country because they were enticed by illegal businesses. One of the roles of churches should be to assist illegal workers and their families in returning to their home countries. Studies have suggested that a significant percentage of illegal aliens would like to go home but don't think they can afford to make the trip or believe it would be too embarrassing to return. Some churches have already begun offering this kind of assistance.

Although Pres. Bush's "exit-amnesty" plan is flawed, it shows promise in that it would offer illegal aliens the opportunity to work a few years, save up money and have time to get their affairs in order before having to return home because they have identified themselves to authorities.

But no exit-amnesty will work unless those in this country illegally and those in other countries contemplating moving here illegally believe that the U.S. will fully enforce its laws designed to stop businesses from hiring illegal workers. Only irresponsible businesses have need of illegal workers or of more than a small amount of legal foreign workers. Fortunately, Congress overwhelmingly last year passed a bill that is to be implemented by this December making it possible for every employer to use a verification system for every hire. Large-scale participation in this voluntary program would eliminate most jobs from the reach of illegal workers. Churches should be encouraging the business owners and executives in their own congregations to voluntarily become a part of this verification system to ensure that they are not guilty of even inadvertently enticing workers to risk their lives at the borders.

The Clinton and Bush Administrations helped create a corrupt culture throughout much of our economic systems by refusing to enforce immigration laws. Like all corrupt cultures, we are somewhat addicted to continuing the corruption. Stopping the corruption will cause some hardship. The church can be helpful in pointing out ways to reduce the hardship through the transition. But the church should not be an apologist for the corruption. The church should not follow the path of the national leadership of the AFL-CIO which has accepted the corruption of illegal immigration and has joined the Chamber of Commerce in calling for a massive amnesty. The union leaders understandably grew frustrated with the unwillingness of the federal government to stop businesses from hiring illegal aliens. If more than 10 million illegal workers and their families were going to be allowed to stay in this country, the union leaders reasoned, then they might as well be made legal so they stand up more fully for their rights and more easily be organized. That is a pragmatic bargain with the present corrupt system. But the AFL-CIO opposes proposals for expanded guest worker programs that match willing workers with willing employers. In the rank and file of the industrial trades unions,

there is great dissent over their national leaders' embrace of amnesty; they feel their own well-being has been sold out by their leaders who have compromised the soul of the American labor movement that for 90% of its history lobbied for restrictions on the importation of foreign labor.

In covering and commenting on the immigration issue, you should at the least consider that in the last public act of her illustrious life of public service, Barbara Jordan led a bi-partisan national commission that concluded that illegal immigration should be eliminated to the extent possible and that legal immigration should be dramatically reduced in numbers. The reason, Jordan said, was that the numerical level of immigration is so high that it serves as a tool of economic injustice against the most vulnerable members of our community.

You don't have to totally agree with that argument to at least acknowledge that there are such powerful reasons for reducing immigration that it is simplistic at best and irresponsible at worst to suggest that the Christian community is necessarily being faithful by lobbying to help corporations import still higher levels of foreign labor.

Roy Beck

Executive Director, NumbersUSA Education & Research Foundation

Recipient of the first United Methodist Communicator of the Year award as Associate Editor of the United Methodist Reporter