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The Good Samaritan Nation

Gallup, an organization that has studied human nature and behavior for more than seventy-five years, has estimated that out of roughly 700 million adults worldwide who would choose, given the opportunity, to move permanently to another country, more than 156 million chose the United States as their desired destination (Clifton). This statistic reveals the worldwide desire to immigrate to the United States—the country portrayed to be flourishing and rich—but in reality, few are able to, since coming legally is an expensive and time consuming process. Because it is so difficult, many people, especially from Mexico and the rest of Latin America, find it easier to come illegally. This increase in illegal entry is creating problems for the United States as well as the countries which these immigrants represent. As the United States government looks for ways to reform old immigration policies in order to deal with the problems illegal immigration is creating, it is important that those policies take into consideration the many benefits of immigration as well as the genuine needs of those that seek residence in America.

All throughout history, people have been leaving their homes and crossing new borders to avoid political or religious oppression, seek economic opportunity, flee from violence, or escape natural disaster. Some are successful, and some are not. Many face difficulty and hardship along the way. Each reason for leaving implies millions of cases and millions of stories. Take Abraham and Sarah's quest for the Promised Land, the settling of the American colonies, or the various migrations of Anabaptists fleeing from persecution. Consider a man named Danilo Gomez. Born in the impoverished country of Guatemala, Danilo Gomez knew that finding work in the United States was the only way to make a life for him and his family. In addition to back-breaking field

work resulting in essentially no income, his family only had access to water every other day, when they would retrieve and carry it long distances over rough terrain. The river served as a washing machine; a fire pit served as the kitchen. Our concept of a long, hot shower contrasts sharply with that of many Guatemalans', where a shower consists of a single bucket of water. (Gomez) Needless to say, living conditions for Danilo and his family were horrific.

Danilo's decision to risk crossing two borders to reach the United States turned out to be worth it. The desire to get an education and to financially support the rest of his family drove him and a group of eighteen others to make the perilous journey across dangerous desert terrain in search of a better life. They were led by a "coyote," a man hired to help illegal immigrants across the borders. The cost of hiring a coyote, along with the risk of getting caught and jailed prevents many from making the journey, but Danilo was determined. After being questioned, stripped of their money, and jailed by Mexican police, he and his group tried again. Eventually, they made it to the border, walked across, and were in America. (Danilo)

After joining his cousins in Sioux City, Iowa, Danilo eventually found work on a dairy farm in South Dakota. "Finding work," Danilo says, "was easy, except when people are racist." Yet for Danilo, it didn't really matter if he was comfortable, as long as he earned money to send back home. Eventually, Danilo was discovered and arrested for violating immigration laws, but not before marrying an American and having a son. Danilo was bonded out of jail and sent back to Guatemala, leaving his family in South Dakota, so he could come back legally.

Getting an immigrant visa, or Green Card, is a process that typically takes six months, but it ended up taking over two years for Danilo, even though he had a wife and child living in the United States. A Green Card is a visa allowing one to legally reside and work in the United States. Without all the right papers and plenty of money on the spot, the process can be drawn

out extensively (Gamber). Corruption in the governments of Third World countries like Guatemala makes getting documents to legally enter the United States very difficult and highly expensive, Danilo says. Yet despite all these obstacles, Danilo has finally returned to his family in the United States after two long years of emotional stress and fervent prayer (Gomez).

Even though Danilo saw illegal immigration as his only chance to escape poverty in Guatemala, many Americans are outraged by the high number of immigrants, whom they believe are unjustly reaping the benefits of a prosperous economy. It provides a great excuse to wrongly discriminate against foreign looking people who are living in our communities and working for our neighbors, but what are Americans really afraid of? One of the most common misconceptions is that immigrants harm the United States economy by neglecting to pay taxes and taking jobs from native-born workers in a time when many Americans are already suffering from unemployment. In reality, though, immigrants provide many benefits that are often overlooked. A recent report by the National Research Council (NRC) indicates that immigrants provide both diversity and growth to the American economy by increasing the supply of labor and by working at cheaper rates, ultimately lowering prices for consumers. In fact, the NRC found that immigration affects the gross domestic product by raising it between one and ten billion dollars yearly—not a lot, compared to the total product, but it is a gain nonetheless (Zaretsky). The agriculture industry depends on foreign labor to function, since most Americans refuse to take such jobs. Furthermore, it is important to note that illegal immigrants are paying their fair share of taxes, including contributions to Social Security and Medicare—a benefit that many are not entitled to receive (New York).

The fear of crime is another reason Americans are opposed to immigration. Many fall into the stereotypical beliefs that all Hispanics are more capable of committing crimes than

Americans because of Mexico's history with drug cartels and drug-related violence. The truth, however, is that race has nothing to do with crime, and it is wrong and unfair to assume that Hispanic people are less trustworthy. It is factors such as poverty and environment, not race, which account for many crimes committed by immigrants. If the United States wants to reduce crime, it should be fighting poverty and uniting broken families instead of condemning immigrants.

Immigration reform has been a major point of debate in recent political campaigns. Changes are necessary, but the opposing views on how to deal with illegal immigrants has prevented many much-needed laws from passing. Many reforms that president Obama has proposed are not supported by the Republican majority in the House of Representatives, including the DREAM Act. The DREAM Act is a legislation that would qualify many undocumented high school students, most of whom are children of illegal immigrants, to continue their education and pursue a six year path to citizenship (The Dream). Passing the DREAM Act would be a small yet helpful start to providing naturalization and citizenship while promoting education and proper conduct, but politicians have not been able to agree long enough to pass any type of legislation. Democrats tend to support amnesty, the granting of legal status to undocumented workers who have confessed and paid a penalty, while Republicans believe in prosecuting those who have used false documents or overstayed their visas, and increased border security (Johnson).

Granting amnesty would be a quick and easy way to erase the term *illegal* from immigrant, but it would do little to stop the flow of illegal immigration since it allows undocumented workers to stay even though they broke the law. In fact, amnesty would likely encourage it. On the flip side, mass deportation is a harsh and unrealistic way to deal with eleven

million desperate Latinos who are actually contributing to our culture and economy in a positive way. If neither complete amnesty nor deportation is a smart solution to fixing illegal immigration, then what is?

It is important to realize that without altering the “push-pull” factors that motivate illegal immigrants, the immigration status will not change. People will continue to flock to the US, pushed by economic conditions and pulled by work and education opportunities. We need to find a way to alter these factors in order to reduce immigration. The US government should promote development by encouraging the governments of suffering countries to be proactive about improving their economy in a way that would reduce emigration. NAFTA, the trade agreement signed in 1993 that was supposed to benefit both the American and Mexican economy, left Mexican farmers in worse condition. Essentially, NAFTA put local producers out of business by opening Mexico to subsidized products. Mexican farmers would lose money if they sold their crops as cheap as the subsidized ones (Roger Bybee). Even though NAFTA has actually contributed to the rise in illegal immigration, and the aftermath it has created has been extremely harmful to the Mexican economy, it was actually an attempt to aid the Mexican economy. It is innovative ideas like this that should be pursued to enhance and grow the economy of neighboring Third World countries. As for the pull factors, the United States could create stricter laws and penalties for those who hire falsely documented workers. Illegal immigrants know that getting hired and living under the radar allows them to be in the United States without getting caught. If employers knew that they could get in serious trouble for hiring an illegal immigrant, they would be less likely to do it, giving immigrants less motivation to come.

The only problem is that push-pull factors are somewhat out of America’s hands, since the causes of immigration lie within the borders of countries like Mexico, El Salvador,

Guatemala, and Haiti. Poor economies, large gaps between rich and poor, and corrupt governments are not problems that the US government is capable of quickly fixing, nor responsible for fixing, no matter how mighty and influential we may be. Rather than focusing on the negative outlook of immigration, however, we should embrace the current benefits it provides in America and strive to create more accessible legal pathways for immigrants. Those seeking legal status should be considered according to need and situation rather than a one-size-fits-all basis. While trying to prevent the entry of illegal immigrants through border security, we are often making it difficult for immigrants to enter at all. Instead of pouring as much as fourteen billion dollars of taxpayer money into a detrimental and fallible dividing line such as the wall dividing the US and Mexico (Mennonite), we should focus our time and resources on issues south of the border, where the heart of the problem lies. It is understandable that if no border enforcement existed, groups like the drug cartels would likely increase business and escalate violence in the United States. On the other hand, desperate people, like Danilo Gomez, who are seeking a way to provide for their family see illegal entry as the only realistic option. Unless we can find a way to work with the governments of Latino countries and make legal status a realistic and affordable option, that will not change. Whatever reforms in immigration are made, it is important that they are made equally throughout the country. Immigration laws made by individual states, like Arizona's law permitting police to question any one they have reason to suspect they is illegal, only complicate the US government's attempts to make comprehensive immigration reform. Immigration is a federal responsibility that states should not interfere with.

Headlines claim victory when they release numbers indicating that overall immigration has slowed significantly since 2007 (Michael), but can this really be considered a victory? Can

Americans reward themselves while millions of families in Latin America are living in abject poverty and thousands of families are being torn apart?

Through all of the loud arguments discussing polarizing opinions on immigration law and reform, the Mennonite voice is pleading to be heard, encouraging the corporate body of the US to show compassion when dealing with immigrants. The question is, will the US listen to that voice, or remain selfishly concerned with their own well being? The immigration issue bares an uncanny resemblance to the story of the Good Samaritan found in Luke 10, verses 29-37. It is obvious that our neighbor, Latin America, is in serious need of assistance—someone to bandage their wounds and lead them to safety. We can choose to be a priest or a Levite by ignoring the obvious needs of our suffering neighbor, or we can choose to be the Good Samaritan nation, taking the time and demonstrating the love necessary to assist our neighbors.

The Good Samaritan illustration can be applied to immigration not only on a large scale, but on a personal level as well, since immigration has, in one way or another, shaped the environment around us as new faces come and go. The United States is, after all, the Great American Melting Pot. It is a country comprised of immigrants from everywhere, and all have shaped America into the thriving country of culture and influence it is today. Instead of increasing border security and deporting needy illegal immigrants by the hundreds, perhaps it is time that America assumes the role of the Good Samaritan and reforms immigration policy in a way that can benefit American society while fulfilling the genuine needs of our neighbors.

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