

MAKING IT PLAIN

BY KIM BOBO



Might There be a Better Way?

Two weeks before Christmas, a thousand Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents, many in full riot gear, descended on meatpacking plants to arrest immigrant workers suspected of identity theft. A photo appearing in the Chicago Tribune showed one poor worker with a chain around his waist, like an animal.

The raid, one of the largest against undocumented immigrant workers in recent years, was clearly designed to send a political message to workers, employers and the public at large. I couldn't help but juxtapose the image of immigrant workers being dragged out of workplaces where they toil to provide food and housing for their families, with the Christmas image of Mary and Joseph finding shelter in a stable. As a society, many of us celebrate the resilience shown by Mary and Joseph as they searched in an unfamiliar land for shelter and protection from Herod, a King who would kill young boys. At the same time, our society terrorizes immigrant workers who work hard in a foreign nation to feed and clothe their children.

The raid was at 6 a.m. While many of us were still in bed, these workers were hard at work.

All six of Swift and Co.'s plants were targets of the raid. In a public statement, the company claimed it was not aware that some of their employees did not have the proper documents. Although this is a little hard to imagine, it does appear that the company was in a difficult situation. Unlike some other companies, Swift has been aggressive about checking on its workforce's documentation. In fact, a suit was filed challenging the legality of their efforts and the company was made to pay a \$200,000 fine for being too aggressive about checking on documentation. When the company learned about the ICE investigation, it offered to cooperate but was ignored. Then, ICE swooped down on six communities, terrorizing workers, ripping parents away from families and halting operations in the plants. Might there be a better way?

As a society, we are completely confused about immigration. On the one hand, we are a deeply faithful nation, one that was built by immigrants. And our faith teachings are crystal clear about "welcoming the immigrant," yet many Americans confuse protecting the country from terrorists with stopping illegal immigration.

We all benefit from the hard work of immigrants, which includes the millions of immigrants who work in our communities but who do not possess proper documentation. They pick our food, process our food, cook our food in

restaurants, cut our grass, clean our offices, hotels and homes, build our homes and provide thousands of other valuable services in our communities.

By not designing a better immigration process, one that will allow these workers to earn citizenship and linking immigration issues with employers, it creates a workplace environment in which workers toil in fear of raiding squads of ICE agents. Unethical employers play upon that fear, threatening to call ICE if any workers file a complaint with the government agencies charged with protecting them. Native born workers compete with immigrant workers who get paid less and treated worse because of their precarious immigration status. All of this creates an environment where workers are afraid to organize to improve conditions. Might there be a better way?

Immigration reform is clearly linked to worker justice.

The other day, Rev. Trina Zelle, the Interfaith Worker Justice organizer in Phoenix, was telling me about a congregation that had offered its parking lot for immigrant day-laborers to gather and wait for employment. When local Minutemen learned about the congregation's plans, they drove motorcycles around the parking lot scaring parishioners and immigrant workers alike.

There is a mean spirit afoot in the nation. Instead of addressing the challenges of immigration, immigrants are being scapegoated. Minutemen shout epithets, cities and states pass mean-spirited legislation banning immigrants' access to social services, housing and drivers licenses and ICE conducts military-style raids on workers trying to earn a living. Might there be a better way?

This year, immigration reform will be a central issue in our national political debate. It is one that is inextricably tied to the moral character of our nation. Because immigration reform is so clearly linked to worker justice, IWJ will be engaged. Next month we will release an immigration reform primer for congregations. Regular analysis and updates on immigration bills will be provided via e-mail and the IWJ web site (If you do not receive our e-alerts, be sure to register for them at www.iwj.org.) Also, we will be helping convene religious leaders on the question of how the religious community might provide sanctuary for immigrant workers.

Might there be a better way for our nation to welcome immigrants? I'm sure there is, but only if people of faith help lead the conversations. For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power and love.