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Guest columnists

Immigrants aren't welcomed here

EVERY day, our faith communities see the struggles of immigrants as well as the hurtful enforcement measures that make their lives unbearable...

By Chris Boerger and Gregory H. Rickel
Special to The Times

Every day, our faith communities see the struggles of immigrants as well as the hurtful enforcement measures that make their lives unbearable.



The Rev. Wm. Chris Boerger

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The vast majority of immigrants come to the United States in search of a better life. They come with hope for their children. They desire for their sons and their daughters a slice of the American Dream. They want to learn English, to get a good job, pay taxes and contribute to a better future for all of us.

Immigration policy has become contentious — even as it has become indelibly tied to our nation's economy. Immigrants and their children now constitute one in every five people living in the United States today. Latinos and Asians constitute roughly 75 percent of all immigrants living in the U.S. Whether they smoothly integrate into our communities — or don't — affects us all.

Since our nation's birth, immigrants have come looking for welcome, but, so far, there's been little welcome here. Both Hebrew scripture and the New Testament charge us to welcome the stranger. But our nation's history has shown we often use every trick in the book to round them up and incarcerate them in inhumane conditions.

The New York Times calls today's detention of immigrants the "fastest growing form of incarceration in the United States." Today, we allow immigrants to find work here in our expanding contingent labor force where wages and working conditions are spiraling downward — then we raid their work places, separate parents from their children and put them in detention centers.

OneAmerica, formerly Hate Free Zone, published a report recently with Seattle University's School of Law showing detainees, held in our Northwest Detention Center on the tide flats of Tacoma, are enduring inhumane conditions that violate international human-rights legal standards and U.S. constitutional protections. A fourth of the detainees interviewed for the report said they were pressured to sign papers whether they understood them or not. They said that when they refused to sign, guards exerted psychological pressure with verbal threats and physical intimidation.

In the study, "Voices from Detention," detainees reported numerous allegations of misconduct and physical and verbal abuse with extremely disturbing accounts.

"Voices from Detention" reveals our overwhelming incapacity to welcome the stranger. Further, we know the detainees in detention are often parents with children they've been forced to leave behind. This is of great concern to us.

Let's all call on our elected leaders to protect and care for all of Washington state's children, native-born and immigrant alike.

We applaud the efforts to ensure health care for all children. Gov. Christine Gregoire's leadership with the bipartisan support of the Legislature now ensures that for all children by 2010. That is a remarkable as well as sensible investment in their — and our — shared future.

Authentic hospitality welcoming the stranger is a spiritual practice in our religious traditions. The governor's recently created New Americans Policy Council, formed to examine how well this state integrates immigrants, is an act of compassion and a warm welcome. This effort will truly help integrate and naturalize eligible immigrants by developing strategies so the 135,000 legal, permanent residents here now will be able to achieve citizenship.

Let's be clear: hardworking, family-oriented, taxpaying immigrants make the economy of Washington stronger. They provide for our food security as farmers, harvesters, processors and handlers. They are our janitors, builders, engineers and health-care and hospitality employees. And they contribute to Social Security at a rate that will reduce its long-term deficit by 15 percent — even though workers who are undocumented can never access that system.

Investment in our immigrant residents is certainly a warm welcome, but it is also a sound and smart public policy. Many immigrants are members of our churches. We pray with them in earnest hope that the governor and the Legislature will find more ways to protect all our children and to weave their families into the fabric and the future of our communities across Washington state.

The Rt. Rev. Gregory H. Rickel, left, is the bishop of the Diocese of Olympia for the Episcopal Church in Western Washington. The Rev. Wm. Chris Boerger is the bishop of the Northwest Washington Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

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