

IMMIGRATION AND FRIENDS TESTIMONIES

# *Seeing that of God in our neighbors*

By Danielle Short



American Friends  
Service Committee



Photo: Gabriella Flora

Danielle Short is a member of Mountain View Meeting in Denver, Colorado. She was the former human rights program director at the Denver office of the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), a Quaker peace and justice organization whose work in immigrant communities is based on its belief in the worth and human dignity of every person.

While she was with AFSC, Danielle did community organizing with immigrants and nonimmigrant supporters of human rights. She also coordinated the production of a DVD faith curriculum on immigration, a joint project with the Colorado Council of Churches, Iliff School of Theology, the Bell Policy Center, the Colorado Immigrant Rights Coalition, and AFSC. And she recently co-founded an intentional community based on sustainability, shared spirituality, and social justice work.

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# *Seeing that of God in our neighbors*

DANIELLE SHORT

**F**riends have been concerned about the exploitation and dehumanization of workers for many years, most notably in our opposition to slavery. I see these injustices in the context of immigration today, but as Friends and other people of faith, we have not reached clarity on a common, Spirit-led response. My experiences working with immigrants confirm my belief that the Quaker testimonies call us to pursue humane policies toward immigrants. My faith calls me to work for a society where we celebrate the dignity and gifts of everyone, regardless of immigration status.

The suffering I see caused by our broken immigration system touches me deeply. It pains me to see immigrants dying in the process of crossing the U.S.-Mexico border. As a parent, I weep when I think of the immigrant parents who live with the possibility of deportation separating them from their children. I feel angry watching the stricken looks on immigrant teenagers' faces when they see a sign saying, "Illegal Immigrants Not Welcome." Surely, there is a better solution. I believe we can create an immigration system that will work for all of us; we do not have to play the rights and benefits of one group against another's. We have more to gain by coming together and addressing the real causes of inequality and injustice. The Quaker testimonies can help guide us towards an alternative vision of society, where we honor that of God in everyone.

## Equality

I first directly encountered the dehumanizing impact of anti-immigrant rhetoric in the 1990s, when I lived in central Mexico, accompanying delegations of U.S. students and church people in dialogue with indigenous and impoverished communities. I remember taking a group of college students to meet a woman named Sirenia, who recounted how a young woman from her village in Guerrero had died en route to the U.S. and returned home in a body bag. When we debriefed the experience later, one of the students asked, “But she was illegal, wasn't she?” The statement floored me in its blatant disregard for human life. How was it that the young woman did not have just as much of a right to survival as any of us?

We are all children of God and are loved equally by the Divine. Economics should be about right relationship. By prioritizing profits over the health and well-being of people (as well as the Earth), our global economy treats those at the short end of the stick as expendable.

Many immigrants to the U.S., both documented and undocumented, migrated because free trade has made it more difficult for them to provide for their children, and they know that many U.S. employers seek immigrant labor. As long as there are economic disparities between nations, there will be displacements in labor from a weaker to a stronger economy.

The presence of 12 million undocumented immigrants in the United States is largely a consequence of global inequality. The inability to develop a humane immigration system reinforces that inequality by marginalizing undocumented immigrants, who regularly experience vulnerability, fear, and exploitation (as well as courage and resistance). Immigrants' frequent invisibility can also prevent non-immigrants from recognizing that of God

in them. This is an obstacle to the spiritual development of non-immigrants.

I sometimes hear people say that “we have to take care of our own” poor first. Could it be that these sentiments are a way of playing poor against poor so that we evade showing care for any of them? I believe that Friends’ testimonies apply to everyone—whether they have their papers in order or not.

In addition to gaining compassion for immigrants, we should explore how our country plays a role in global economic inequality. Theologian Miguel De La Torre traces how in 1954 the U.S. Marines installed a Guatemalan dictatorship to protect U.S. business interests, bringing poverty, strife, death, and migration to escape from these dangers. In an American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) newsletter, he wrote, “Maybe the ethical question we should be asking is not ‘why’ are they coming, but, how do we begin to make reparations for all we have stolen to create the present economic empire we call the United States?”



Photo: Jon Krieg

**The Madits, a refugee family from Sudan living in Iowa.**

We need to identify and address the root causes of undocumented immigration so that people have the choice to stay in their home communities. Short of that, we need to create humane policies so that people who cannot make a dignified living in their home countries can go in a safe and orderly way to countries where the jobs are. We chose not to bring the U.S. and Mexican economies into alignment (as the European Union did) when we aggressively promoted the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) to our neighbors, and chose instead to fortify our southern border. We would do better if we removed the vulnerable status of undocumented immigrants through legalization, which would raise wages and labor standards for everybody.

In our society, it has become commonplace to dehumanize immigrants, and those who appear to be immigrants. In recent years, we have seen an increase in expressions of hatred against people of color, both immigrants and citizens. The term “illegal alien” allows us to lose sight of our common humanity. That term has also become racially coded language that conjures up images of Mexican and other Latino/a immigrants.

While groups that oppose legalization often say that they are not anti-immigrant, just “anti-illegal immigrant,” the examples they offer of the supposed dangers undocumented immigrants pose are overwhelmingly of immigrants of color. This covert racism is reinforced by the links many of their leaders have to white supremacist groups, as well as public statements referring to the inferiority of certain racial and cultural groups.

As Friends and other people of faith, we should be aware of these connections and examine our own reactions to the debate. Are we looking for that of God? Do we love our neighbor as ourselves? Is it possible that unconscious prejudices are keeping us from viewing immigrants with compassion?



**On both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border fence (San Diego).** Photo: Pedro Rios

## Peace

After several years of working in Mexico, I began organizing with Spanish-speaking immigrants in Colorado with AFSC. It was ironic to me that I had traveled to live and work in Mexico so easily, while there was no way for my new immigrant friends in Denver to obtain work documents.

I heard many stories of the dangers these courageous people had faced to enter the United States. One Guatemalan friend shared her pain that her young son still carried the trauma of crossing the desert with a “coyote” (i.e., someone paid to transport undocumented immigrants into the country) to join his parents, even though years had passed.

Over the past 20 years, the federal government has invested billions of dollars in a futile attempt to prevent undocumented immigration by fortifying the U.S.-Mexico border. This has created a new, contemporary kind of war profiteering in the form



**Immigration Advocacy Days in Washington, D.C. (2007).** Photo: Terry Foss

of lucrative contracts to build border security installations and detention centers. How can we accept a system where people see this as the best option? Since the implementation of border enforcement policies in the 1990s, according to a Mexican congressional report, nearly 5,000 migrants have died from hypothermia, dehydration, and drowning while crossing the border.

**The Friends' Peace Testimony is a deep expression of our core belief that each of us has a spark of the Divine, and nothing can extinguish that spark. We seek to resolve conflicts through peaceful reconciliation, and we reject violence, inequality, and injustice, which are seeds of outward violence and war. Enforcement strategies lead to suffering. Borders and laws should serve human beings, rather than vice versa.**

## Simplicity

I have had the privilege of meeting with workers from the maquiladoras, or assembly plants, on trips to the U.S.–Mexico border. Several of them were fired for daring to organize for better working conditions in the factories. I have seen how young women have lost their youth prematurely while trying to meet their production quotas.

I remembered them later when I met Mayan women in the state of Chiapas, Mexico, whose communities were in the path of a proposed multinational free trade zone. The women sat on the side of a hill, embroidering their beautiful huipiles (blouses) while they eloquently told my group of students why they did not want that kind of “development” in their community. These women were poor by many standards, but they were clear that retaining their traditions, their land, and their communities was their choice.

The Quaker Testimony of Simplicity refers to both spiritual and material simplicity. By letting go of our desires to own and consume, we free ourselves to focus on deeper truths. We ask ourselves how our comfort is getting in the way of our faith. We challenge ourselves to examine our anxieties about our financial security and to trust that the goods of the Earth are sufficient for everyone, if we share them.

We view undocumented immigrants as God’s children who have just as much of a right to a dignified life as U.S. citizens, crossing borders to feed their children if necessary. Our faith shows us that they are not a threat to our well-being, but rather that we can work together so that we all have what we need, but not necessarily more.

Many of us are motivated to live a simple lifestyle because of our awareness of our impact on the Earth, and this is ex-

tremely important. But we can have the most impact on the environment by understanding the root causes of environmental degradation and by working for better environmental standards (especially for corporations and the military) and sustainable communities. Rather than accepting the scapegoating of immigrants, who are by no means the heaviest users of resources, we should work for the right sharing of world resources.

## Community

As a Spanish-speaking community advocate, I'm often asked by immigrants why a white woman from the U.S. like me would care about their situation. It saddens me that it would seem that compassionate people are unusual. Most of my immigrant friends' experiences with white English speakers are of rejection or invisibility. Why should it be remarkable that I am concerned that members of my broader community are struggling to live with dignity?

We need to remember that all life is interconnected, and that welcoming immigrants helps us become closer to God. We can work to build the blessed community where everyone is able to relate to that of God in one another.

Community is not just about those closest to us, or those with whom we feel the most comfortable. I believe that God calls us to break out of our comfort zones and build community across difference. This means promoting a multicultural and inclusive vision for our society. The anti-immigrant movement is challenging the idea that people from different cultural, racial, and ethnic backgrounds can coexist peacefully. Friends can play an important role here in standing up for a vision of harmony and peace among peoples.



**March for the health and safety of immigrants (Plainview, CA).** Photo: John Tipton

## Integrity

I have struggled greatly with how to talk about immigration with Friends. When I began working on the issue, there was a small and passionate group working to raise awareness about the humanitarian aspects of immigration in my yearly meeting. It is a controversial issue, and it seemed that many people were not interested in broaching it.

Immigration provokes passions on both sides of the issue, with some Friends expressing concerns about immigrants' impact on wages, state and local services, and population growth; discomfort with immigrants breaking the law to enter the country; and the perception that immigrants are not learning English.

My concern is that I know how slanted most media coverage of immigration is, and how hard anti-immigrant groups have tried to frame the issue in a way that activates people's fears. The Quaker Testimony of Integrity refers to the value of speaking

plainly, hiding nothing, dealing honestly, and refraining from deceiving or exploiting, and I feel it is important to expose the lack of integrity in the mainstream immigration debate. We Friends, along with other people of faith, need to do this in the context of questioning the dominant paradigms of our time.

We need to be sure that our understanding of immigration is grounded both in the facts and in our faith, not in our fears. I believe we need to engage in real dialogue, explore the issue deeply, and listen to each other's concerns. We need to ask ourselves, "What is the whole truth? Are we only seeing a piece of it?"

Friends look at this issue from multiple perspectives, including that of U.S.-born workers. Reputable studies have shown that common assumptions about immigrants' impact on jobs and wages come from a simplistic analysis of the economy. A more nuanced analysis shows that the impact is minimal at most, once immigrants' economic contributions are taken into account.

Even when one considers the small impact immigrants have on wages, one should not isolate immigrants in an analysis of wage levels. Numerous other dynamics have a much greater impact, such as continued racial discrimination against African Americans, decline in protection of labor organizing rights, outsourcing, increased automation of work, and the decline in the inflation-adjusted value of the minimum wage.

When immigrants are isolated as the cause of economic insecurity in our country, I have to wonder if there is something else at play. People in this country have historically blamed immigrants for our economic woes, and I believe this is in large part because of deep-seated fears of those who are different from us, rather than a calm analysis of the issues.

## What can be done

I believe that God calls us to welcome immigrants to our communities and work to address the deeper social injustices in our society. Immigration is not a cause of injustice, but a symptom. By ignoring our broken immigration system, we contribute to human suffering.

I believe that it is time for Friends and other people of faith to develop a shared public witness in regard to immigration. Steps that we could take include holding threshing sessions, forums, or film showings on the issue; building relationships with grassroots immigrants' rights organizations; supporting day laborer projects; attending immigrants' rights rallies; speaking publicly, writing letters to editors, and contacting policy makers; volunteering to set up water stations in the Southwest desert; supporting families affected by immigration raids; or joining the New Sanctuary Movement, a recently formed interfaith movement to accompany and protect immigrant families who are facing the violation of their human rights.

Immigrant communities are organizing for change as never before. Faith communities are becoming key players in the immigrants' rights movement, and now is the time for us to put our faith into action on behalf of justice for immigrants.



Photo: Terry Foss

**Immigrants' rights march (Philadelphia).**

## **AFSC Principles for Comprehensive Immigration Reform**

**Toward humane and fair immigration policy**

1. **Respect for the civil rights and all human rights of immigrants.**
2. **Inclusive and coordinated measures that support immigration status adjustment for undocumented workers.**
3. **Support for the distinctly important and valuable role of family ties by supporting the reunification of immigrant families in a way that equally respects both heterosexual and same-sex relationships.**
4. **Humane policies that protect workers and their labor and employment rights.**
5. **Measures that reduce backlogs that delay the ability of immigrants and refugees to become U.S. permanent residents, citizens, and full participants in the life of the nation and of their communities.**
6. **The removal of quotas and other barriers that impede or prolong the normalization of immigration status.**
7. **Guarantees that no federal programs, means-tested or otherwise, will be permitted to single out immigrants or refugees for exclusion.**
8. **Demilitarization of the U.S.-Mexico border and respect and protection of the region's quality of life.**
9. **International economic policies (including "free trade" agreements) that are consistent with human rights, fair trade, and sustainable approaches to the environment and economic development.**

For more information, please contact one of the AFSC offices working on immigration issues.

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## **American Friends Service Committee**

*The American Friends Service Committee is a Quaker organization founded in 1917 that includes people of various faiths who are committed to social justice, peace, and humanitarian service. Throughout its history, AFSC has stood with immigrants and refugees in the United States and internationally. Guided by the Quaker belief in the infinite worth of all people and by faith in the power of love to overcome violence and injustice, AFSC supports the rights and dignity of all immigrants, regardless of their legal status.*

## **PROJECT VOICE** o)))

The American Friends Service Committee's Project Voice is a nationwide immigrants' rights initiative that works to influence and help shape the national agenda for immigration policy and immigrant rights. Project Voice stands with immigrant and refugee communities nationwide in their struggle for recognition and respect—because justice, liberty, and dignity aren't privileges, they're inherent human rights.