

“Undocumented” Immigrant Workers in the USA and some Christian Responses

"Despite society's ongoing desire for services of day labourers and immigrant domestics, the climate of racism and harassment has reached a fever pitch...."

(New Sanctuary Movement)

"No human being is 'illegal' "

(Dianne Aid, President, Episcopal Network for Economic Justice)

The Background

"We are only shoulders", reads the headline in a newspaper in North Carolina, reporting on the plight of Latin American immigrants, working on plantations in camps of between 200-2000 people. Often behind barbed wire, with large signs stating "Do Not Trespass - Residents Only".

The headline in the newspaper refers to the working method in the fields: workers have to fill large baskets with vegetables or tobacco leaves and carry them on their shoulders to a waiting lorry. They earn 45-50 cents per large basket. In the USA, agriculture is virtually exempt from Health and Safety and other protective regulations and even 12 year old children are allowed to work in the fields for long hours. Some are even younger but nobody bothers to check.

The United Nations estimate that at any one time 200-250 million people are on the move around the planet in search of work and food. The US government believes that ca 10-15 million Latin Americans are "illegally" in the country, with 1.2 million arriving new every year (1). As here in Europe, people do not just leave their homes, houses, friends, roots, culture, language and religion for fun and opt to do hard physical labour without adequate payment because they "fancy" that: people move because they are poor and cannot feed their families and themselves where they come from.

The movement of destitute human beings from Latin American countries into the USA has one major reason: the so-called North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA): it allows for cheap exports of highly subsidised US corn and other goods into Latin American countries where they are sold at dumping prices, thus pushing native farmers completely off the supply chain because they are not subsidised and cannot compete with US prices. US exports to Mexican i.e. have increased by 240% since the introduction of NAFTA in 1994 (2) and US corn is being sold up to 30% below the cost of production (3) because it is subsidised by the US government. By 2003 about two million farmers in Mexico alone have lost the jobs as a consequence (4). The numbers from other Latin American countries are equally dramatic: thousands and thousands of small and medium size farms had to be given up as a

result of NAFTA and there is no end in sight. Whole villages and towns all over the middle and north of Latin America have depopulated because even subsistence farming is no longer viable. The biased application of NAFTA exacerbates an already critical economic situation in developing countries struggling with financial mismanagement, high unemployment, military unrest, drug wars, social and political instability and millions under the poverty line. Another yet minor reason is that the artificial Mexican/US border runs through ancient tribal lands, thus dividing tribal nations and indigenous people to their cultural, religious and economic detriment.

I visited two Episcopalian parishes in Seattle, Washington State, an Episcopal Farm Workers' Centre in North Carolina, the Latino Missioners of Washington (DC) and Maryland, the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service Centre in Baltimore and the Roman Catholic Council on Immigration in the Archdiocese of Baltimore as well as numerous "Food Larders" and "Thrift Shops" run by churches of different denominations. All people I met, highly motivated, committed, passionate advocates for the Christian faith and its practical application as expressed in Matthew 25 (and many other passages in the Bible), say the same: the immigration issues surrounding so-called "undocumented workers" from Latin American countries are created by politicians and agricultural and industrial lobbyists. However, the real issue is not the number of visa-less "undocumented" workers because the entire US economy would collapse without them but that the US industry (agriculture is but one part of it) refuses to pay fair and proper wages for the labour it so ruthlessly exploits: fair wages, sick and holiday payments, insurance and pension contributions - little or none of that is paid, not to mention the urgent implementation and continuing enforcement of proper Health and Safety measures in all areas.

Like migrant workers in the UK, "undocumented aliens" in the US only get the most dangerous and lowest paid jobs, usually in occupations US citizens themselves do not want to do. Farm workers in North Carolina i.e. earn about 35% less than the national average (5). It is estimated that due to inflationary pressures wages decrease by 5% annually (6). Because of the total lack of legal protection for farm workers, they often suffer from dehydration and pesticide poisoning (especially those who work on tobacco plantations). They often have to work 12 or more hours in any given day. Adequate medical care in case of accidents is mostly negligible and farmers and growers are exempt from paying compensation to insured workers. This has been borne out by interviews I did with workers when visiting the camps and by many reports by NGOs (7).

Living conditions for workers in these camps are mostly shocking: twenty or more people to a cabin, without air conditioning when temperatures soar to 100+ (F). The cabins only have beds in them, nothing else: no chairs, tables or cupboards for clothes, nothing to store private property in. "Lucky" workers have mattresses covered in plastic so that they can be cleaned, the unlucky ones sleep on mattresses that have not been replaced or washed for years and are mostly filthy and

disgusting. Toilet and kitchen facilities are equally awful. There are no washing machines, therefore workers have to clean their clothes by hand - with cold water, in a plastic basin, after a 12 hour working day... The camps are off the beaten track and mixing with the native population is near impossible, so are visits to shops, banks, surgeries or schools for those workers who are in the US with their children. There are no English classes. "Married Quarters" are unheard of: a sheet hung across the cabin is the only privacy married couples get. The camps I visited reminded me more of prison camps than labourer accommodation.

Despite these atrocious living and working conditions, the workers face the same barrage of hostility, aggression and racial prejudice as they do in the UK. In the USA too, immigrants are accused of being "benefit scroungers" and "tax evaders". However, like here in the UK, immigrants in the USA are not eligible for benefits or any kind of welfare. And of course, immigrants pay the same taxes as anybody else. The US Social Security Administration has estimated that the "undocumented workers" pay six -seven billion dollars in Social Security contributions which, ironically, they are not able to claim for themselves (8).

Encounters

Two of the Episcopalian parishes I visited are situated to the North and the South of the city of Seattle in the Diocese of Olympia, Washington State. Saint Matthew/San Mateo, an official Sanctuary Congregation, is in Auburn, Resurreccion is in Mount Vernon's Komo Kulsan cluster of ecumenically collaborating parishes. Both parishes face similar issues and highlight in their various approaches to immigration the enormous complexity faced by both churches and immigrants. Saint Matthew/San Mateo and its neighbouring parish St. Elizabeth, both linked in with the Diocese of Olympia's Indo-Hispanic Ministry, serve a large group of Purepecha Indians from Mexico, whose livelihood in farming was destroyed by NAFTA. Many of them do not speak Spanish but only their own ancient Purepecha language. This leads to double discrimination within the Spanish-speaking Hispanic community, a problem few people seem to talk about. The problems faced by both language groups are, of course, the same. The Latina Missioner for Saint Matthew/San Mateo is Dianne Aid, a Franciscan, with degrees in anthropology and cultural geography. She speaks Spanish as a second language and is currently learning Purepecha. She is also the president of the Episcopalian Network for Economic Justice (ENEJ). Dianne is training to become one of the few legal "lay" people who are allowed to represent immigrants at immigration court hearings. The course she attends is run by the Catholic Legal Immigration Network and is an excellent example of ecumenical networking.

Jo Beecher, a former MP in El Salvador, is the priest for the Spanish-speaking Parish of the Resurreccion where Misteco is the main native language among her Latino parishioners. Apart from the "usual" pastoral problems of parishioners living below the poverty line, problems with accommodation, schooling and health, facing

deportation at any time day or night, families split by enforced deportation, absence of husbands and fathers in working camps, both parishes provide language and translation services. Resurreccion Parish specialises in providing immigrants with computerised driving lessons. Jo Beecher and her team have managed to get a range of computers on which immigrants can run virtual driving lesson programmes, preparing them to take the State driving test. If they pass they will obtain, although remaining otherwise "undocumented", a driving license. That in itself is a step in the right direction towards legal documentation but it also enables immigrants to become taxi- and bus drivers, jobs they would not otherwise be able to obtain. It frees them and their families from the exploitation by gang-masters and growers and the instability of seasonal working. The State of Washington is now the only of the fifty American States which allows undocumented workers to obtain a driving license. The other two which until recently had similar laws have withdrawn them under the ever increasing political pressure from right-wing anti-immigration groups.

Another very serious yet not often openly talked about pastoral and legal problem is that of systematic rape and sex trafficking of women and children. While in the UK NGOs working in this area state that about 4000 cases of sex trafficking come to light annually, the numbers in the USA are astronomical although reliable evidence is hard to come by because of the shame and discrimination associated with these crimes. Colleagues told me of cases where gangs smuggle whole families into the USA "to order". When the families arrive the parents are handed over to the police and deported while the children stay behind and are being abused by the traffickers' clients. Both parishes are very much involved with trying to keep together families already split or threatened with deportation. The inter-denominational New Sanctuary Movement in the USA is very deeply involved in providing as much legal and pastoral protection as possible.

The Episcopal diocese of Olympia is unique in financing two Latina Missioners. Other dioceses struggle to find the money for one, even part-time, missioner. Some Episcopal dioceses, although located in areas with large numbers of Latin American "undocumented" immigrants, have no Latino Missioners at all and don't seem to see this witness to the poor and marginalized as essential for their ministry in this world.

Hector Rodriguez, the Latino Missioner for the Diocese of Maryland, is desperate to expand his pastoral work among Latin-American workers in Baltimore and other cities in his State but his diocese says it has to cut back its contribution rather than increase it. Fr Hector, like all others working in this field, is very much involved in the "DREAM Act", currently before individual state legislatures. The DREAM Act states that a young "undocumented" person who has been in the USA for at least five years and goes to college for two years while achieving good grades or serves in the army for two years will become eligible for legal permanent residency in the US. This pioneering legislation would make sure that the enormous talent and potential of immigrant children will be channelled into a better future for all Americans

whatever their ethnic origins. Together with other mainstream Christian denominations, the General Convention of the Episcopal Church has passed a resolution in 2009, supporting the DREAM Act and demanding its implementation.

However, across the USA as well as the UK, people, even practising Christians, are beginning to say that "charity starts at home". Unscrupulous right-wing agitators even try to stir up anti-immigrant feelings against Latin Americans among the Black American population. They deliberately ignore the enormous financial and labour contributions "undocumented" immigrants make to the US economy. For example, in the State of North Carolina alone every immigrant labourer contributes ca \$12000 annually to the economy of that State (9). This fact is well known but deliberately ignored by some.

Here in the UK, one encounters similar deliberately misleading and false statements from neo-nazis and xenophobes, claiming e.g. that the economic contribution of a migrant worker in the UK was the equivalent of a "mars bar" although even the head of the CBI has stated repeatedly that the contribution of migrant workers to the UK economy is in the region of 10-15% of GDP annually! Christians need to speak up for the truth, here as everywhere else.

I spent nearly a whole week shadowing the impressive work Tony Rojas does in North and Eastern Carolina. He is the head of the Episcopal Farm Workers Ministry in Newton Grove. Every year ca 150 000 farm workers from all over Latin America come to North Carolina to work in the fields - under often hazardous conditions (10). Over twenty-five years, Fr Tony, a very energetic 74 year old, has built up a most impressive ministry, including a clinic and school as well as meeting and worship facilities. He employs a specialist in immigration law to help his parishioners settle in the US. He is on his feet from early morning to often late at night, bringing a bit of humanity and hope to the lives of immigrants living in quasi prison camps. Fr Tony estimates that ca 25% of the immigrants in his area of North Carolina arrive with temporary working visas, arranged by gang masters, the rest are "undocumented", e.g. "illegal". Because of the economic importance of the land workers, police and immigration officials don't enforce deportations while the work in the fields goes on.

Fr Tony serves as priest for two other Spanish-speaking congregations in his vast area, sharing the churches of white middle-class parishes. The "Hispanos" are very welcome in one of them but not in the other. Sadly, I have seen other examples of two congregations never meeting although using the same church - just not the same language.

In Baltimore I had the great pleasure of meeting Sister Ilaria of the Columban Missionary Order. She is a Roman Catholic community activist, working with "undocumented immigrants" while also representing her religious Order at the United Nations in New York. With her and Fr Hector Rodriguez I attended a meeting of the Baltimore Archdiocesan Council for Immigrants and Refugees. Several Roman

Catholic Parishes in Baltimore have Spanish speaking groups but because of financial and personnel constraints, some of these parishes are administered together, marginalizing the Latino ministry in the process. The picture is the same in all denominations: the demand for support and help is very real and at times overwhelming but resources are scarce in all churches. The Roman Catholic hierarchy as a whole as well as individual bishops are very clear in their passionate plea to national and State legislators on one hand and their own congregations on the other for a just and humane treatment of “undocumented” workers. The Roman Catholic Bishops have on many occasion spoken loudly and clearly for the (human) rights of immigrants.

Fr Hector Rodriguez authored the pastoral letter for his Episcopal diocese of Maryland “Welcoming the Stranger”. The letter had such an impact that it was adopted in an edited and expanded form by the national church, published by the national bishops’ conference and sent to all Episcopalian parishes in the USA in September 2010.

Because of the social history of the USA, a very large number of churches of all denominations worth their Christian calling operate “thrift shops” and “food larders” on their premises or at least support other churches’. Thrift Shops enable the poorest of the poor to acquire furniture and other household goods as well as clothes very cheaply. Food Larders fulfil the same function, providing mostly tinned and packaged food, rather than fresh produce. On a previous visit to the USA, I visited the Food Larder of the medium sized St. Luke’s Methodist Church in Hampton, Virginia. This one Food Larder alone, staffed entirely by ecumenical volunteers, supports more than 1800 families a year. Hampton is regarded as an affluent area but the ongoing recession has pushed more and more people down the socio-economic ladder.

In the UK, Food Larders and Thrift Shops run by churches are as yet a rarer occurrence. However, this is slowly changing, too. The Trussel Trust, which runs food banks in churches across the country, has reported a 50% increase in demand for its services during the last year alone (11). As the poverty crisis widens here too, all Christian churches in this country should learn from our brothers and sisters in the USA.

The Lutheran Church in the USA takes its Christian obligation to look after and fight for the marginalized very seriously. The Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS) is based in Baltimore and is a beacon of hope for thousands who have had to leave their homelands due to social, political, racial or religious unrest. In 2009 LIRS supported 239 detained torture survivors and helped bring 10904 refugees safely to the US. They were mainly from Burma and Iraq. LIRS, on behalf of the American Lutheran Churches, acts, like other Christian churches too, as a professional advocate for undocumented workers. Linda Hartke and Stacy Martin of LIRS gave me a very clear picture of the daunting task facing Christians who want to awaken the moral imagination of their country and “make visible immigrant workers,

refugees and asylum seekers as children of God” (12). Like the Roman Catholic and the Episcopalian bishops in the USA, LIRS has issued convincing biblical and concise theological guidance to their membership on what the scriptural and theological reasons behind “Current Issues in Immigrant and Refugee Protection” are. This kind of unequivocal guidance from the top, be that a bishops’ conference or a synod, on where our Christian responsibility must lie, is sadly missing from some churches in the UK.

Most churches and church organisations I visited in the USA which are involved in immigration advocacy are members of the New Sanctuary Movement, a movement very much in its infancy in the United Kingdom, of The Jubilee USA Network or the Interfaith Worker Justice Network. And while the US has a plethora of Christian and secular, national and State based organisations, fighting and advocating for migrant labourers and their rights, the only national organisation in the UK to take up this task is the Migrants Rights Network, run from London by Don Flynn. While individual churches either produce theological guidance in form of leaflets or by employing missionaries who speak migrant labourer relevant languages, there is no network across the ecumenical spectrum in the UK which would enable Christians of different denominations involved in this issue to collaborate and campaign together. There are no networks within individual churches and their congregations either. Not one Church of England diocese has a Migrant Workers’ Chaplain at present. The issue is driven by secular organisations - to the detriment of our Christian responsibility to care for the stranger and exercise radical and prophetic hospitality.

The majority of immigrant labourers in the USA are "undocumented" or "illegal" while most migrant workers in the UK are European citizens with the legal right to stay and work in the UK. This does, however, not cloak the fact that both groups experience horrendous exploitation and abuse beneath their general invisibility in our societies.

Isn't it time we as Christians took note of what is going on at our doorsteps, spoke up and acted decisively to protect and defend our brothers and sisters against the bloodhounds of Dickensian capitalism and mindless rightwing xenophobia? We need networks within our denominations and between our various churches which would link all those who work with migrant workers; we need to stop pretending that all is fine in the "State of Denmark". We need to make sure that our Christian engagement with issues of exploitation and abuse of the strangers in our midst is not left to midnight speeches in the House of Lords where only Hansard will retain a trace of their impact but not the hearts and minds of those most in need of hearing God's message of liberation and freedom.

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(2) US Department of Agriculture (2004)

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- (11) Church Times (20.5.11, page 6)
- (12) New Sanctuary Movement website