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Moral courage needed in refugee crisis

By Rev. Tommy Williams | November 22, 2015

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People of Christian faith are on the cusp of the season of Advent, a time when we remember the birth of Jesus. The Gospel of Matthew tells us that just after Jesus' birth his family became refugees to Egypt in order to flee persecution and violence. Our Scriptures and many other faith traditions have as a central and prominent tenet the welcome of the stranger, the foreigner, and the immigrant. This nation has a history of such welcome.

Fellow citizens, these lines are written on our Statue of Liberty: "Give me your ... huddled masses yearning to breathe free..." When commissioned, this monument and these words were meant to welcome people fleeing all sorts of situations back home in native lands to our shores. Many of our ancestors were among these huddled masses.



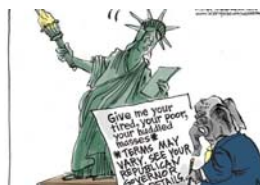
Fast forward to this historic moment in 2015: We live in a time of mass migration. Refugee crises are the reality the world over. This has been true not for months but for years. Those from Central America, and now from Syria, and the war-torn Middle East are the latest ones. Old and young seek a safer, more hopeful life somewhere other than in their ancestral land - a striking decision when you stop to think about it. The vast majority of them come with this simple aim: a peaceful life.

During times of terror, murder and violence, political leaders will make decisions that protect their own innocent citizens from harm. Yet what about the innocent who are left in the crossfire? Of the Syrian refugees being referred by the United Nations for settlement, more than half are children under the age of 18. A large proportion of them are women or elderly men. The protocol for admittance under refugee guidelines takes an average of 18-24 months during a rigorous screening process. Kathleen Newland, a senior fellow at the Migration Policy Institute says, "The refugee resettlement program is the least likely way for a terrorist to infiltrate the United States."

It is morally irresponsible for political leaders to lead with fear and misinformation. Governing is about making considered choices in speech and action for all of a nation's citizens. Recent statements by political leaders are disappointing and appeal more to our base selves than to our more worthy selves. We expect our leaders to shepherd us on a higher plane.

Does this mean we receive people indiscriminately and irresponsibly? Of course not. But

OPINION



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neither do we indiscriminately and cavalierly shut out those masses who are "yearning to breathe free."

One year ago, we were grappling with a response to those coming in larger numbers to our southern border. That challenge is ongoing. The Syrian question is the latest manifestation of a global reality. This challenge will not go away and, in fact, is an opportunity for our communities to show our moral courage in the face of fear. If we are not able to do that, we will have responded in exactly the way the forces of evil desire.

Christian faith leaders are joining me to call upon:

Gov. Greg Abbott to reconsider his direction to state agencies to stop assisting organizations that help resettle Syrian refugees;

U.S. representatives and senators to reject any bill that shuts down funding for refugee resettlement.

Each faith community to find tangible ways to welcome a refugee family.

All citizens and leaders to reject rhetoric unbecoming American values and all Christians to speak in ways that give dignity and honor to all people.

We must respond with conviction to show once again that, in the words of Martin Luther King Jr., "darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that."

Williams is Senior Pastor of St. Paul's United Methodist Church. Also contributing to this commentary: Janice Riggle Huie, Bishop, Texas Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church; the Rt. Rev. C. Andrew Doyle, Bishop, Episcopal Diocese of Texas; Michael Rinehart, Bishop Texas-Louisiana Gulf Coast Synod, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America; Rev. Mike Cole General Presbyter, Presbytery of New Covenant; the Very Rev. Barkley Thompson, Dean Christ Church Cathedral; Rev. Dr. Steve Wells Pastor, South Main Baptist Church; and Rev. Harvey Clemons Pastor, Pleasant Hill Missionary Baptist Church.

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