

## “The Radical Hospitality of Jesus”

Keynote Address given by Jim Winkler  
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California Pacific Annual Conference Immigration Event  
April 21, 2007  
Los Angeles, California

Greetings in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

I want to say a special word of thanks today to and for the Francisco Canas, the Coordinator for the National Plan for Hispanic and Latino Ministry of the United Methodist Church. Francisco issued the invitation for me to be with you today.

GBCS is committed to the Hispanic Plan and right now we are working on a Module III workshop on Wesleyan Theology and we are designing workshops related to areas of immediate interest to the Hispanic/Latino/a community including one on immigration and advocacy.

I'm grateful for Francisco's leadership and his ministry. The National Plan for Hispanic Ministry is charting the way forward for the UMC. The several ethnic ministry plans of our church are the right thing to do.

The UMC is 93% white in a rapidly diversifying nation. There's lots of moaning and groaning in our denomination about membership loss. I know because I've been accused of causing it.

50 or 60 years ago, we established a lot of congregations in the mostly white suburbs around the country. That made sense because people were moving there. It's my opinion we actually didn't build enough new churches, but that's another story. It's difficult for an institution to change, but 50 years from now when our church looks back I hope people will say, “Thank God, we created ethnic ministry plans and established a lot of churches in racial ethnic communities.”

As you know, I serve the church as general secretary of GBCS. One of our ancestors was the Board of Temperance, Prohibition, and Public Morals. The old Board of Temperance worked on many issues but was particularly involved in the crusade for an amendment to the U.S. Constitution prohibiting the sale and production of alcohol. Sometimes, people see this as a quaint and peculiar episode in American history.

Some years ago, I came across copies of the temperance board's newspaper and was shocked to see how intensely anti-immigration it was. You see, there had been a huge wave of immigration into the United States in late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries from eastern and southern Europe.

The general secretary of the Board of Temperance was Clarence True Wilson. He said, "We must eliminate these little foreign language groups segregated from the rest of our people and from the assimilative processes of America that keep up their old world customs planning disloyalty in peace time and plotting treason in war time."

The president of the Board of Temperance, Prohibition, and Public Morals, Bishop James Cannon, emerged as the most powerful leader of the temperance movement in the United States. Bishop Cannon hated the Catholic Church almost as much as he hated alcohol. He said Catholicism was "the mother of ignorance, superstition, intolerance, and sin." In 1928, the Governor of New York, Al Smith, ran for president. Bishop Cannon said that Smith wanted

"...the Italians, the Sicilians, the Poles, and Russian Jews. That kind has given us a stomach ache. We have been unable to assimilate such people in our national life, so we shut the door on them. But Smith says 'give me that kind of people.' He wants the kind of dirty people you find today on the sidewalks of New York."

Bishop Cannon eventually was hauled before a Senate committee to face charges of financial impropriety and before the General Conference on charges of immoral conduct. One colleague who worked closely with him for forty years said he had never seen Bishop Cannon laugh.

I share that story with you because most of us United Methodists are not aware of our history. It wasn't just Bishop Cannon who said bad things about immigrants. We Methodists played a big role in the passage of the 1924 immigration act which severely limited immigration into the U.S. We wanted the racial purity of the nation preserved and Protestant domination to continue.

We might like to think those attitudes and that episode is ancient history. Well, six months ago, I received this email from a United Methodist Church pastor who serves in a largely Hispanic area:

"Just out of curiosity ... what part of ILLEGAL don't you get? It means that someone entered this country WITHOUT OFFICIAL SANCTION ... they crossed the borders of this sovereign nation WITHOUT HAVING AUTHORIZATION TO DO SO - that, folks, is a technical INVASION, or an ACT OF WAR -

What that means, is that these "enemy" combatants are fair game for being rounded up and herded into PRISONER OF WAR compounds, until a state of war - declared by our Mexican, Central and South American neighbors - ceases to exist. That will happen when (1) they cease their invasion, (2) are caused to or voluntarily surrender or (3) they are finally overwhelmed and defeated by counter attack and main force.

You are aiding and abetting the enemy, which is an act of treason, punishable by death or life-time imprisonment at hard labor - that is according to the Uniform Code of Military Justice and applicable United States Statutes (as well as the terms of the Geneva Convention).

Needless to say, I won't be there, unless it is to see you all arrested for treason and then I'll cheer as you are carted off to the pokey."

It is fascinating and tragic to see how intensely anti-immigrant the views can be of immigrants themselves, of people who have stolen from others the very land they live in.

But a far more sophisticated anti-immigrant campaign is operated by a United Methodist named Roy Howard Beck, the executive director of an organization called Numbers USA. Numbers USA is not your typical, overtly racist immigrant-bashing organization.

On the Numbers USA website, Roy Beck writes, "It dawned on me that most of the national problems Congress was trying to solve or at least minimize were being made worse by Congress having allowed immigration numbers to rise radically over the last 30 years. I discovered that nearly every measure Congress was taking to improve the American quality of life was being undermined by congressional immigration policy. This was no more evident than the week in 1990 when Congress passed major new regulations to decrease Americans' per capita air pollution. During that same week, Congress drastically undercut the benefits of the Clean Air Act by increasing immigration numbers so that in the next few decades there would be tens of millions more people in the country contributing to air pollution. Yet not a single member of Congress commented on the inconsistency."

I, too, am deeply concerned about environmental and economic justice. It seems obvious to me that air pollution has a lot more to do with inefficient use of oil and coal and economic injustice has a lot more to do with low wages paid by companies such as Wal-Mart and tax cuts that benefit the rich. I'm not convinced immigrants are the cause of those problems or keep the United States from addressing them.

These attitudes are all too prevalent despite a Bible and a faith that demands hospitality for the sojourner. "Come you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, *I was a stranger and you welcomed me.*" (Matt. 25) That's what is meant by the radical hospitality of Jesus.

Just two days ago, I spoke with an Iraqi Christian woman who has lived in the U.S. for about 15 years. She said that hospitality is just what you do in her part of the world. You take in complete strangers without a question. Here, she said, there's always a transaction involved. It's business, she said. What's in it for me? Even, she said, when she has been invited to church the intention is to get her to join the church of the one who extended the invitation rather than simply to participate in the joy of worshipping God.

Hear this:

"The Lord appeared to Abraham (of Iraq) by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he *ran* from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. He said, 'My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant.' So they said, 'Do as you have said.' And Abraham *hastened* into the tent to Sarah, and said,

‘Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes.’ Abraham *ran* to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who *hastened* to prepare it. Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he *stood by* them under the tree while they ate.” (Gen. 18)

Last month I was in Iran and met with President Ahmadinejad, the leader of part of President Bush’s axis of evil. I was part of a delegation of Christian leaders from the land of the Great Satan. Were we so much as frisked? No. Were we asked to go through a metal detector? No. When I met with Arafat, the victim of countless assassination attempts, with King Abdullah of Jordan whose grandfather was assassinated, with President Assad of Syria, with Prime Minister Hariri of Lebanon who was subsequently murdered, never once were we searched or questioned. Why? We were guests.

Here in my own country the presumption is guilt when you meet with those in power. Background checks are required before you enter the White House. Armed guards are everywhere. And that’s for citizens. We don’t know what hospitality means. How can we extend it to so-called illegal aliens?

“Then Moses set aside on the east side of the Jordan three cities to which a homicide could flee, someone who unintentionally kills another person, the two not having been at enmity before; the homicide could flee to one of those cities and live.” (Deut. 4) Imagine that.

Today, the Korean community is frightened because a young Korean man carried out a mass murder on the campus of Virginia Tech. Why in the world should they be frightened unless an irrational host community had the capacity to turn on them, sojourners in their midst?

I’ve been to my share of political rallies and demonstrations. I remember at the age of 11 marching with members of my church to support a moratorium on the bombing of North Vietnam. There’s usually lots of protest signs and such at these demonstrations. Last year, though I went to a strongly pro-American rally on the National Mall in Washington, DC. The rally was organized by immigrant rights groups. The spirit was wonderful. I can’t remember a day when I recited the Pledge of Allegiance as many times in one day as I did then.

For years, our board has urged Congress to enact comprehensive immigration reform legislation that focuses on the following elements:

\* **A Path to Permanent Residency:** Hard-working immigrants who are contributing to this country should be encouraged to come out of the shadows and regularize their status. Forcing millions of undocumented workers to hide in an underground economy hurts the health, safety and welfare of all Americans. Proposals that would create a legal but permanent underclass would be equally unfair and discriminatory. Our goal should be to integrate immigrants into the United States, once they meet reasonable requirements like background checks and payment of back taxes. This can only be done by providing

them with meaningful opportunities to become lawful permanent residents and eventually United States citizens.

\* **Firm and Fair Enforcement:** Our nation's immigration policies must be consistent with humanitarian values and with the need to treat all individuals with respect and dignity. Any proposal - like H.R. 4437 in the previous Congress - that would criminalize undocumented immigrants, encourage state or local police to enforce immigration laws, or penalize anyone for providing humanitarian assistance to their fellow human beings must be strongly opposed. Criminalizing undocumented immigrants or the people around them with new punitive measures will not deter illegal immigration; it will only drive it further underground.

\* **Restoration of due process:** In 1996, Congress enacted immigration laws that drastically affected the rights of immigrants. The laws imposed an extremely harsh new system of mandatory detention and deportation for immigrants with prior criminal offenses, even legal permanent residents with very old or minor infractions. The term "aggravated felony" is now applied in immigration law to go far beyond what most members of Congress contemplated, to even include misdemeanors, and many forms of judicial review have been curtailed. Any immigration reform proposal that fails to address - or even worsens - the well-publicized, unfair impact of the 1996 laws would raise serious concerns. Immigrants facing deportation for any reason must have access to fair, humane and common-sense procedures.

\* **Family Reunification:** Our family-based immigration system needs to be significantly reformed. It can often take years or even more than a decade for close relatives of U.S. citizens or permanent residents to obtain immigrant visas, which simply encourages people to overstay temporary visas or find some other way to enter the country. In order to reduce backlogs, any proposal should stop subtracting the visas given to immediate relatives of U.S. citizens from visas available to all family immigrants, thereby artificially depressing the number of visas available to other close relatives of U.S. citizens and permanent residents. We must also stop preventing U.S. citizens and permanent residents who can support their families at or above the poverty level guideline from reuniting with their families.

\* **Future Flow of Workers into the U.S.:** Any immigration proposal designed to meet the proven needs of employers for new labor must fully protect the rights of both immigrant workers as well as those already here. A proposal that simply forces established workers to leave the U.S. after a short period of time, with no path to citizenship, will make the workers vulnerable to abuse and exploitation.

Why does someone leave their home country anyway? Why leave their family, friends, loved ones, familiar surroundings, culture, and language? I suppose some do so for adventure, but most people do so because life in their nation is intolerable and there appears little hope for change.

Several years ago, church leaders from Honduras and Guatemala met with me in my office in the United Methodist Building on Capitol Hill. They asked me and other church leaders to oppose the Central America Free Trade Agreement. It would, they contended, kill people in their country and destroy economic opportunities for millions of people. They predicted many would leave home and make their way to the United States to look for work.

I went with a delegation of people to meet with my own Member of Congress, Jim Moran, who was one of the chief supporters of CAFTA. Moran was highly annoyed with our opposition. Yes, he conceded, it would cause problems in the short run for some but in the long run the economies of those countries would be more closely linked to the United States and they would therefore benefit.

Moran told us his good friend, Oscar Arias Sanchez, the president of Costa Rica and one of the richest men in the country, had assured him that CAFTA was necessary. We pointed out that Arias himself would certainly benefit from the agreement, but that did not mean it would trickle down to everyone. Well, we lost on CAFTA. Just barely.

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to understand the terrible damage done to El Salvador, Nicaragua, Guatemala, and Honduras during the contra wars of the 1970s and 80s when the U.S. government supported murder and slaughter and death squads against anyone who questioned the established feudal order. People fled from their homes. Coupled with CAFTA, the United States has created one nightmare after another for the people of Central America.

Can we make a difference? Yes. We must advocate for good immigration legislation, for trade agreements and relationships that are fair and just, and we must apply direct pressure to achieve proper working conditions for migrant workers in this country.

Several years ago, a delegation of GBCS board members traveled to North Carolina to look into the conflict between the Mt. Olive Pickle Co. and the Farm Labor Organizing Committee. A boycott sponsored by FLOC was underway and our board was wrestling with the decision of whether or not to join. One United Methodist spoke proudly of how her local church supplied clothing and food to the migrant workers employed by local farmers.

One of the migrant women responded by saying, "We thank you for your help and for the food and clothes, but we want to be paid enough money to buy our own clothes and food." For me, that one exchange spoke volumes.

Eventually, the National Council of Churches and the UM General Conference endorsed the boycott. Within a few months, Mt. Olive and the pickle growers settled with FLOC. Guess what? Mt. Olive is doing fine.

We supported the Coalition of Immokalee Workers in their successful struggle against Taco Bell. And, more recently it was announced "US church leaders are lauding a wage agreement between the McDonald's fast-food chain and a group

representing migrant farm workers in the state of Florida. The agreement between McDonald's USA and the Coalition of Immokalee Workers requires the restaurant chain to pay one US cent more for every pound of tomatoes picked by the farm workers, a move that will double the farm workers' wages."

Taco Bell and McDonald's are going to be all right. The workers will be better off, too. The involvement of the churches in support of the workers has been significant. Our moral and ethical voice carries weight.

We've come a long way, but we sure haven't reached the Promised Land. We have a role to play in transforming the world for Jesus Christ. One of the ways we participate in this transformation is through the great social justice movements for civil rights, women's rights, peace, environmental justice, and the rights of immigrants and migrant workers. Who speaks for the poor, the peacemakers, the merciful, the persecuted, the peacemakers, if not us?