

Why churches still matter for immigration reform

“We can’t depend on political parties to provide moral clarity.”

[Amy Frykholm](#) interviews Ali Noorani in the [August 16, 2017](#) issue



Ali Noorani. Photo by Joel Geertsma.

*Ali Noorani is the director of the [National Immigration Forum](#), an organization that highlights immigrants’ contributions to American society and seeks to reform immigration law. He was previously director of the Massachusetts Immigrant and Refugee Advocacy Coalition. Noorani’s recently published book *There Goes the Neighborhood: How Communities Overcome Prejudice and Meet the Challenge of American Immigration* draws on his efforts to engage a wide range of conversation partners on the issue.*

What’s gone wrong in the debate over immigration?

For years the debate has been about policy or politics. But for the majority of Americans, immigration is about culture and values. At the National Immigration Forum, we find that people's first questions about immigration are: Is my culture going to change? Are my values going to change? Is my neighborhood going to change? We have to understand the cultural debate.

What do you mean by “cultural debate”?

People struggle with this issue through the lens of their faith, or through their belief that this is a nation of laws, or through a belief in a free market. Faith, a legal framework, capitalism—these are elements of American culture and these elements need to be engaged. In this case, I think the church in particular has a crucial role to play.

What does it take to engage these subjects?

It is first of all a matter of understanding where people are coming from. You have to listen to the language and listen to the concerns. After that, you can develop a way to have the conversation. I've learned how important the language of welcoming the stranger is in a faith context, and I've also learned why people are committed to wanting to live in a nation of laws that are obeyed. I appreciate the tension that sometimes exists between these two commitments.

Does the conversation on values depend on Americans sharing the same culture or set of values?

I am not sure that we do share a common definition of what it means to be American, but I think the way we recapture that common definition and understanding is not through the political process. We can't depend on political parties to provide moral clarity. We need to work through churches, schools, the military, businesses. That is where people are either forced to or given the opportunity to get out of their bubbles.

Do churches help people get out of their bubbles?

I write in the book about how First Baptist Church in Spartanburg, South Carolina, is welcoming Syrian refugees regardless of their religious identity. Spartanburg is small-town South Carolina. I think we can find lots of examples where churches are creating these bridges. In fact, I'm not sure there is a more important institution in

America than the church in resolving these differences.

What is the role of clergy and religious leaders in this conversation?

Russell Moore of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, Archbishop Thomas Wenski, and other faith leaders have shown me that the job of faith leaders is not to speak to matters of policy but to speak to the values and the cultural framework underneath a policy. If we ask a pastor to speak to a policy detail, we are actually taking one of the most trusted players off the field. Pastors can educate their congregations, but on matters of values, not about a particular visa program.

Do you find yourself, as a result of these conversations, thinking about policy in a different way?

My policy framework isn't different. The goal is still a functioning immigration system with legalization and eventual citizenship for the undocumented. But I realize we have to do a much better job of communicating how that framework of reform maps onto values that people are expressing. If we want conservative voters in the Midwest to understand why immigration is a benefit to them, we need to understand what their fears and hopes are. Over time, you can have a conversation where you move to clarity about what you agree on and what you disagree on. Once you have established that level of trust, you can look for a common set of principles and ways to share those common principles with networks.

Can you give an example of how this works?

In 2010 Utah was slated to be the next place after Arizona where a "show me your papers" law for immigrants was going to go into effect. Conservative faith leaders, law enforcement officials, and business leaders came together to find an alternative route. They developed what came to be called the Utah Compact, consisting of principles—not policies—related to family, security, and the free market, principles that resonated deeply with Utahans. These principles became the rallying point for the initial group of signatories that included the Catholic Church, the Republican attorney general, faith leaders from the Mormon community, and the Utah Chamber of Commerce. It quickly moved into the legislature. The Utah Compact stopped the "show me your papers" law in its tracks.

Legislators recognized that their constituents did not want a replica of the Arizona law. They wanted something that fit the culture and values of Utah. So we could move forward on immigration if we could bring the right people into the room and articulate the right principles.

What is the future of this strategy?

Since 2011, the forum has put a priority on engaging faith leaders, law enforcement officials, and business leaders. We stumbled on the phrase “Bible, Badges, and Business,” based on the idea that if you hold a Bible, wear a badge, or own a business, you want a common-sense solution to the immigration system. We now have a network of trusted leaders who look to the forum for how to move forward.

Coming out of the election, I wondered if the network would stick together. A large number of people in our network voted for Trump. While a few have questioned whether we really need comprehensive immigration reform after the election, 99 percent of the network has stuck together. This network is finding its voice. For example, the Evangelical Immigration Table sent the Trump administration a letter urging it to help the Iraqi Christian community, which is being threatened with deportation. That might not have happened right after the election. The law enforcement community is also trying to find its voice, as Congress is considering enforcement-only legislation that they don’t fully support.

How far out is comprehensive immigration reform?

Far. But if there is one president who could help pass comprehensive immigration reform, it is Donald Trump. He has an incredible opportunity to fix this problem. I am not sure his base will allow him to do that, but maybe there will be an opportunity. For the president, it’s a question of political will.

Could you offer me a story that gives you hope?

In Spartanburg we recently held an event at the Hispanic Alliance. There were more than 80 people in the room, and they included not only the Hispanic community, but representatives of the Baptist community, the local sheriff’s office, and the business community. They all wanted to advance a constructive dialogue on immigrants and immigration in South Carolina, one of the most conservative states in the country.

A version of this article appears in the August 16 print edition under the title "Talking together about immigration."