

Changing terms and hearts seen as key to debate

WASHINGTON - The immediate future looks a bit grim for those who work on trying to improve the lot of immigrants in the United States.

- Presidential candidates are trying to outdo each other in espousing harsher approaches to handling illegal immigration.
- There's essentially no chance of a comprehensive immigration bill moving through Congress until after the presidential election in November.
- Many state legislatures reconvening this month will work on bills that would require local police to enforce federal immigration laws and make it harder to get jobs, housing and public services without legal papers, as well as other measures meant to push immigrants who lack documentation to leave the jurisdiction.
- And the public rhetoric about immigrants just seems to be getting more and more acidic, even in The Chronicle of Higher Education, whose target audience is academics and college employees. In early January an online article in the Chronicle about Arizona's universities reclassifying some immigrant students as out-of-state under a new state law attracted a string of harsh comments about illegal immigrants.

"The debate in the United States is almost dangerous," said former Ambassador and former Assistant Secretary of State Princeton Lyman to an audience of employees of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops Jan. 9. Lyman now is an adjunct senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations and an adjunct faculty member at Georgetown University in Washington.

The one-time ambassador to Nigeria and South Africa described what's being said about immigrants by political leaders, particularly presidential candidates, as "very worrisome."

"Some of it is fed by racist inclinations, but others are just worried about the

possibility of an unending flow of immigrants,” he said. He described some political candidates’ pledges for dealing with illegal immigration as “very worrisome,” but added that he hopes such rhetoric will die down as the campaign comes to a close.

Into this environment steps Bishop John C. Wester of Salt Lake City as the new chairman of the U.S. bishops’ migration committee. And he does so with optimism that the church’s faith-based position on aiding immigrants will eventually win the day – changing hearts and attitudes in the United States.

“It’s about building bridges, not building fences,” he said, summarizing the approach he believes the United States needs to resolve the tangled mess of immigration laws, policies and human situations.

Teachings based upon the words and actions of Jesus and the Catholic Church’s history of welcoming immigrants go a long way in giving the church an edge in trying to shape attitudes and public policy, said Bishop Wester.

That needs to start with leadership at the parish level, with Catholics being reminded that Jesus himself was a child refugee when his family fled to Egypt to avoid persecution and that he lived his years of ministry as a migrant, moving from place to place.

“We need to strive to get conversions of the heart going,” he said, “and I hope that we would be a strong voice in supporting comprehensive immigration reform.”

One of the most frustrating aspects of the public debate about what to do about immigration, Bishop Wester said in an interview with CNS Jan. 11, is the shock-jock approach of talk radio that dismisses the complexities of the issue with sound bites like “what part of illegal don’t you understand,” or “send them back to their own countries.”

A great deal of popularly accepted misinformation further complicates the debate, he said.

“People have come to believe they take away jobs and cause crime to go up,” said Bishop Wester. “That’s simply not true and we have the statistics to prove it, but it helps create an atmosphere.”

In his talk earlier in the week, Lyman suggested one approach the Catholic Church might take in trying to change the tone of the immigration debate: replacing the word “amnesty” with “forgiveness.”

Change the language, for one thing, Lyman said. “Why is amnesty a bad word? It connotes illegality but its root is in forgiveness. We need to use that term more, forgive.”

Proposals considered by Congress last year to allow the immigrants already in the country illegally to stay here and legalize their status have been dismissed as amnesty by opponents of the idea.

Bishop Wester noted that those who derisively dismiss the process as amnesty ignore the penalties included in such proposals – requiring that undocumented immigrants pay fines and back taxes and wait for permanent legal residency behind those who apply to immigrate while remaining in their home countries.

“If you break the law and go to court, you might get probation, a fine or a sentence to do community service,” Bishop Wester said. “That is a form of amnesty that we accept.” The proposals for legalizing undocumented immigrants are much the same, he said.

Lyman also recommended that the USCCB make a point of linking the flawed U.S. immigration system and the growth in human trafficking and other crimes.

“There is a link between the broken immigration system, human trafficking, the drug trade and criminality,” he said. “You need to draw the connections.”