

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. famously preached a sermon entitled “The American Dream” in which he sought to remind us: “You see, the founding fathers were really influenced by the Bible. The whole concept of imago dei, as is expressed in Latin, the ‘image of God,’ is the idea that all men have something within them that God injected... that every man has a capacity to have fellowship with God. And this gives him a uniqueness, it gives him worth, it gives him dignity. And we must never forget this as a nation: there are no gradations in the image of God. Every man from a treble white to a bass black is significant on God’s keyboard, precisely because every man is made in the image of God. One day we will learn that. We will know one day that God made us to live together as brothers and to respect the dignity and worth of every man.”

Dr. King’s words are prophetically resonant in an age when there are more than 65 million people forcibly displaced worldwide. Every day 42,500 people are newly uprooted and more than half of these are children. These statistics are so overwhelming that it is possible for us to forget that there are individual people behind these numbers. These numbers are so overwhelming that they naturally lend themselves as fodder for the feeding of fear and hostility. And yet there is a local organization that is working very hard to reveal the humanity behind these numbers.

On a recent weekday morning, in the largest meeting room of the Stamford Marriott Hotel, every chair was taken by local business leaders and representatives from across the faith communities and political spectrum to celebrate the ongoing work of Building One Community: The Center for Immigrant Opportunity (“B1C”). Trinity is a longtime supporter of the work of B1C. Indeed, many of you will know our own Bruce Koe, who worked to bring this initiative into existence and has served tirelessly to take B1C from strength to strength. I am also thrilled that many members of our church family volunteer to teach English as a second language and our students are making their own volunteer impact at B1C.

Catalina Horak, B1C’s Executive Director, shared, “Despite the unsettled atmosphere in our country during 2017, the [B1C] staff and volunteers did a remarkable job continuing to serve the immigrant community in the greater Stamford area.” Speaking of the courage and fortitude of the immigrant community, Horak commented, “Their stories are compelling; their dreams are bright.”

In 2017, an army of 400 B1C volunteers (fifty of them students from Greenwich and Stamford) worked with 2,821 clients from 54 countries providing them with opportunities to learn, to work and to become productive members of the broader community. B1C’s numbers are impressive. Last year, 1,438 clients enrolled in English as a second language (ESL) or vocational ESL classes; 579 clients obtained jobs or participated in job training classes and formal certification programs; and 1,266 clients participated in support programs for assistance with immigration issues, health care, tax preparation, parenting and school engagement. Board Chair Anne Downey commented: “Building One Community focuses on creating opportunities for immigrants seeking to extend their skills and improve their lives. Our programs educate, employ, empower and engage the entire community in the process.”

Rich Andre, Associate Director of State and Local Initiatives for New American Economy (“NAE”), brought some helpful context to the work of Building One Community. NAE is a bipartisan coalition of more than 500 mayors and business leaders from all 50 states who recognize just how important

immigration is to our communities' ability to succeed, to compete economically, and to be strong and safe. Andre told a packed room of supporters: "Immigrants come from all over the world, and many have come to Stamford and Fairfield County to pursue their American dream. And some need some support, whether that be English or job training or the like. B1C is providing this support. It's not a handout; it's a hand up. [B1C] helps folks realize their potential and contribute fully to this community."

"If I asked you how many major metro areas in the United States grew over the last 40 years without immigrants, the answer is zero. There was not one major metro area that grew without at least 10,000 immigrants moving there between 1970-2013. While the overall population grew by just 2%, the immigrant population grew by over 16%. In fact, without that growth in the immigrant population the overall population would have shrunk slightly. So, when it comes to bolstering the tax base [and] having a young, dynamic work force, population growth is a huge part of that, as any Chamber of Commerce executive will tell you, and immigrants are really key to that growth..."

With specific reference to Fairfield County, Andre continued: "Not only are immigrants making huge contributions to population growth, they're also making outsized economic contributions. We found that in 2016 alone immigrant households earned over 9 billion dollars in income. They contributed hundreds of millions to the tax base locally, and that's paying for roads and schools and things that everyone depends on, [such as] public works, and over 2 billion dollars to federal taxes. When you take their income and subtract the taxes they pay, what's left over is what we call spending power, and that's money that goes right back into local economy... for paying for housing, for cars, groceries, gas. ... That amount of spending power is bigger than the GDP of some small countries. This is really something where the county should feel fortunate to have such an economic driver in their population."

Andre added that entrepreneurship was also one of his favorite statistics to talk about. He added: "There's something inherently entrepreneurial about the immigrant experience. Uprooting from one's country, moving to a new place and starting over is a risk-taking endeavor. And so we see that risk-taking mirrored in the fact that immigrants are much more likely to start a business, both nationally and also in Fairfield County. Immigrants account for more than a third of small business owners in the county, much larger than their share overall, and they're bringing in hundreds of millions of dollars in business income."

His research also revealed that 47% of immigrants in the county are now naturalized citizens. "That's much higher than a lot of the communities we work with, and I think that's important because the naturalization rate shows that immigrants are choosing to put down roots. ... Immigrants see Fairfield County as a place to start a family, to build their career. Seeing that rate be so high, I think, speaks to how welcoming this place is. Building One Community is a reflection of the nature of this community."

David Martin, Mayor of Stamford, strongly agreed in the remarks that he made at the event. Martin is a strong supporter of B1C and he spoke of his civic pride in serving a city that expresses such tangible support for immigrants seeking to become productive members of society. Congressman Jim Himes got a standing ovation from the packed room when he affirmed that, "The United States

of America is a nation of immigrants and a nation of decency. Immigrants are an economic, moral and spiritual strength of this country and need to be treated as people.”

The Hebrew word for “justice” (“mishpat”) occurs in its various forms more than 200 times in the Hebrew Testament. Its most basic meaning is to treat people equitably or fairly, to give people their rights, to protect and to care. Over and over again, mishpat describes taking up the care and cause of widows, orphans, immigrants and the poor. But there is a second Hebrew word that can be translated as “being just.” That word is tzadeqa and it refers to a life of right relationships. In the Bible, tzadeqah refers to day-to-day living in which a person conducts all relationships in family and society with fairness, generosity and equity. We see it in Micah 6, verse 8: *“He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”* I am humbled by B1C’s enduring commitment and embodiment to exactly this kind of rare and Godly justice.

In His great love,
Drew