

Editorial: Building spiritual muscle with education and immigration

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If we look around, the world is full of exercises in spiritual formation.

Our hot water heater went out over the weekend. City living quickly became like camping, and I came face-to-face with how much I take for granted. Attending church, a speaking engagement and meetings without a “proper shower” made me a little self-conscious of my nonverbal communication—my scent.

I thought about what a good life I have that I can be inconvenienced by cold water. I thought about some of my children’s schoolmates who, for lots of reasons, don’t get a “proper shower.” I thought about people desperately trying to get to a place like the United States where life is as good as I have it. I thought about how the good life I enjoy is what others want, too.

But I grumbled before I thought.

While trying to enjoy my first shower in a few days—you read that right—my mind was pulled by the bitter debates over education and immigration. Just mentioning those two topics seems to light a fuse. How can we see these topics differently?

Then, it hit me. Both are opportunities for building spiritual muscle. The opportunity often is obscured by the details of the debates.

Education strengthens the community and the church

Consider this detail: Nearly [60 percent](#) of [students enrolled in Texas](#) public schools are economically disadvantaged. An [economically disadvantaged student](#) is defined as a student eligible for free or reduced-price meals, [eligibility](#) being determined by the relation of household size to household income.

An aside: Included in that 60 percent are the children of some of our pastors who can't afford private schools or who serve churches in communities too small for private schools. While we may not want to admit that some of our pastors are economically disadvantaged, our awareness of that fact might change how we advocate for our public schools.

Back to the opportunity: Instead of seeing economic disadvantage as a shame better left unexamined, Christians can see economic disadvantage as an avenue for connection.

While addressing the causes of economic disadvantage, Christians can connect with students, families, teachers, school administrators and the larger community in many practical ways.

Christians can encourage educators with regular prayers and notes of support. They can provide supplies—along with a flyer about who provided the supplies—to families and teachers who can't afford to buy supplies. Dennis Boswell and the [School Ministry Network](#) are a resource for these and other ideas.

Christians also can visit their elected officials to advocate for better policies governing public education. Elected officials know that every visit from one of their constituents represents many more votes. Christians can stand in the gap between the students and teachers in their district and the

officials who determine so much of public education. [Pastors for Texas Children](#) can teach us how to advocate.

By connecting with students and educators, Christians live out Jesus' connection with us, practice the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23), and create and strengthen the connection between the community and the church.

Another aside: How does the way in which Christians engage public education mirror the way in which we engage education in our churches? Working for stronger public education may strengthen our Sunday schools, Bible studies and other discipleship efforts.

Immigration strengthens the community and the church

Just as our involvement in education is an outward expression of how the Spirit of God is shaping us internally, so is immigration. Like public education debates, current immigration discussions tend to be more discord than discourse. We have very different opinions about what to do with people who “aren’t from around here” but who want to be.

An aside: Many pastors are a kind of immigrant. They are called to communities foreign to them. Some churches welcome pastors well, and other churches welcome their pastors and their pastors’ families like those Americans who don’t want immigrants coming to the United States. The way a church welcomes a new pastor and family is good practice for welcoming other [foreigners](#), to use a biblical term.

Brenda Kirk and Tim Moore, south central mobilizers for the [National Immigration Forum](#) and the [Evangelical Immigration Table](#), teach people how to overcome polarity by building relationships of trust through “living

room conversations.”

To date, Kirk and Moore have conducted at least four living room conversations in Lubbock, Corpus Christi, Sugar Land and El Paso. They ask open-ended questions of the 10 to 15 participants, beginning with a focus on feelings and moving to questions about participants’ knowledge of their community. Participants are free to pass on any question, and they are not to interrupt or attack another person’s response. Instead, they are to listen respectfully and speak honorably.

These conversations generally last about two hours. After 30 to 40 minutes, participants finally trust each other enough to begin to be honest.

Instead of being drawn in to the bitter tension of immigration debates, Christians can practice patience, kindness, self-control and other fruit of the Spirit by listening to others voice their fears and concerns about immigration. Christians can be examples of God’s peace in the midst of heated circumstances.

Heavy lifting builds muscle

I’m no Pollyanna. Engaging in public education and immigration in the ways mentioned above isn’t easy. Lifting heavy weights or running a marathon isn’t easy—even for the pros. But the exercise puts feet to our faith, showing it’s alive.

When exercising, it’s important to know a few things about our bodies so we don’t injure them. We need to know how to stretch, bend, lift and pace ourselves. In the same way, it’s good to know a few things when we want to exercise our minds and spirits so we don’t wound ourselves and others.

In addition to Pastors for Texas Children, the School Ministry Network, the National Immigration Forum and Evangelical Immigration Table, the

following informational resources can help:

- [Raise Your Hand Texas](#)—report on public school funding
- [Center for Public Policy Priorities](#)—faith-based advocacy for education, immigration and other concerns in Texas
- [Out of Many, One](#)—report on immigration
- [Bibles, Badges and Business](#)—network for immigration reform
- [Rational Middle](#)—short films about immigration

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