

# Immigrants & immigrant myths

*LSP members stand up & speak out about one of the most contentious issues of our time*

By Doug Nopar

During the past year, a growing number of Land Stewardship Project members in southeast Minnesota have begun to examine more deeply the issue of immigration, particularly as it pertains to agriculture and rural communities. Some members have been in direct dialogue with Latino immigrant workers, many of whom work on farms or in food processing. Other members have attended immigrant rights workshops. Their objective has been three-fold: build friendship; gain an understanding of how Latino workers and longtime LSP members have both been hurt by U.S. farm, trade and immigration policy; and lastly, begin to seek solutions together that can benefit both immigrant workers and native-born farmers and workers.

On March 21, more than 200,000 immigrant rights supporters and their allies, including a bus load from southern Minnesota organized by Centro Campesino (the Farmworker Center), rallied in Washington, D.C. Their aim was to push the federal government to enact comprehensive immigration reform. This marked the beginning of what promises to be a vibrant debate in the coming months. In light of this, LSP members have submitted letters that have been run in newspapers throughout the region. In particular, members are concerned that misinformation and exaggeration will drive the discussion about immigration reform. Following are excerpts of what these LSP members have written on this subject lately.

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## I have been prejudiced

"I have to admit that, for many years, I have had some real myths in my mind about immigrants — myths that I never really challenged. I probably have been a bit prejudiced, too. But I remember being at a legislative hearing awhile back and the issue of immigration came up. I saw emerge in that room the side of America that is totally prejudiced, and it made me very uncomfortable. All of these negative myths about Mexican immigrants, for example, have become part of our national psyche, and it's a real shame. As a farmer, it's been interesting to realize that many of the immigrant work-

ers here in southern Minnesota are farmers too. They come from the farms and farming villages of Mexico."

— **Dwight Ault, Austin, Minn.**

*Ault farms with his wife Becky and son Grant. He has participated in several community dialogues on immigration.*

## Paying their share

"When I hear these myths about immigrants, I get upset. These comments are unfair and unjust. Some people just want to believe everything they hear about immigrants taking our jobs, getting welfare, etc. But these myths are just not true. When it comes to crime, it's not the case that most immigrant workers are causing trouble.

## # of visas don't equal the # of jobs

The U.S. only issues 5,000 visas for unskilled workers each year. This represents only 1 percent of the 500,000 undocumented workers finding work in the U.S. annually, according to "The Economic Impact of Immigrants in Minnesota, 2009," a September 2009 report produced by the University of Minnesota's Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs. No wonder undocumented immigrants can't just get in line for a visa.

Percentage-wise, they're not responsible for crime any more than anyone else. Some complain that immigrants don't pay taxes. That is not true either, even for undocumented workers. If they've got a job and they get a paycheck, they pay taxes. Just look at their pay stub. Social Security, Medicare, federal and state taxes are all taken out of their paycheck."

— **Darline Freeman, St. Charles, Minn.**

*Freeman is on LSP's Winona County organizing committee. Through LSP and other community groups, she has had extensive contact with the Latino community.*

## Allowing legalization

"I know immigrants who work in miserable conditions processing meat and poultry, enduring constant wet and cold. These immigrants are not threatening our economy,

they are keeping it going... With their hard work ethic, devotion to family and sense of initiative, our country needs immigrants more than ever. Those without documents deserve the chance to legalize their status by paying substantial fines, learning English and going through a background check."

— **Barbara Allaire, Winona, Minn.**

*Allaire is a specialist in teaching English as a second language.*

## A nation of immigrants

"Under much hardship, my own ancestors emigrated from Germany in the mid-nineteenth century. I have greatly benefited from their courage, their hard labor, their community building and their citizenship. Now I also benefit from the spirit, culture, labor and services that many immigrants provide the community of Mankato, our state, our country and myself. One aspect of sustainability is just treatment of laborers. If we as employers and communities rely on these immigrants to provide products and services we need, I believe we certainly are called to help them live in dignity. Even more, because we are one in the great web of life, I want to be among those who encourage our national leaders and ourselves to create immigration reform that allows others to seek the dreams our ancestors had and that have benefited us."

— **Sister Kathleen Mary Kiemen, Mankato, Minn.**

*Kiemen is a member of LSP's Board of Directors and heads the Center for Earth Spirituality and Rural Ministry for the School Sisters of Notre Dame.*

## Legislative reform needed

"I have recently reviewed some of the main points included in the Immigration Reform Bill (sponsored by Illinois U.S. Representative Luis Gutierrez) and ask that we as U.S. citizens study this bill and consider asking our Congressional Representative to support it. The bill outlines reforms that address the concerns of U.S. citizens and migrant workers. It proposes a new visa that would improve and expand the present process. It would also address the treatment and conditions of those people who are U.S. born citizens and may be working in unde-

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sirable or marginal employment.

“The changes would offer broader opportunity in a shorter time to migrant applicants who are willing to comply with the necessary criteria. That includes background and security checks, compliance with taxes, and a payment of a fee to help cover the application and training process. The visa would be conditional and the persons would have to show good character and compliance with all conditions.”

— **Bonnie Austin, Wykoff, Minn.**

*Austin farms with her husband Joe. Last year, she participated in immigrant rights workshops led by Centro Campesino and Advocates for Human Rights.*

### Politicizing the word ‘immigrant’

“As we have politicized the very word ‘immigration’ we have lost touch with our own histories. Despite our common histories, we continue to deny rights to people on whom we rely heavily for valued commodities and services, merely because they were not born within our borders. My involvement with the Land Stewardship Project and its efforts to build bridges between farmers, rural residents and immigrant workers has made it even more obvious how much we all share in common. As I write this letter, thousands are gathering to march on Washington to seek immigration policy reform. May their efforts help us to realize the richness

immigrants add to our communities and may we have the ability to look more closely at our own immigrant roots.”

— **Diane Leutgeb Munson, Rushford, Minn.**

*Leutgeb Munson is on LSP’s southeast Minnesota steering committee. In recent years she has worked side-by-side with Mexican workers on area produce farms.*

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### What do you think?

LSP as an organization is working on creating a system that treats *all* people involved with our food and farm system fairly. Here are some major questions to consider:

→ If immigrant workers were legalized, would that help prevent their exploitation by factory farms and industrial food processors? Would factory farms then have less of a competitive advantage over family-sized farms?

→ Could LSP’s own farmer-members benefit from being able to legally hire experienced immigrant farmworkers?

→ As we look ahead to the need for more local produce growers, what if immigrants with farming experience could feel confident of their legal status and raise food for local markets?

→ Can we achieve the kind of agricul-

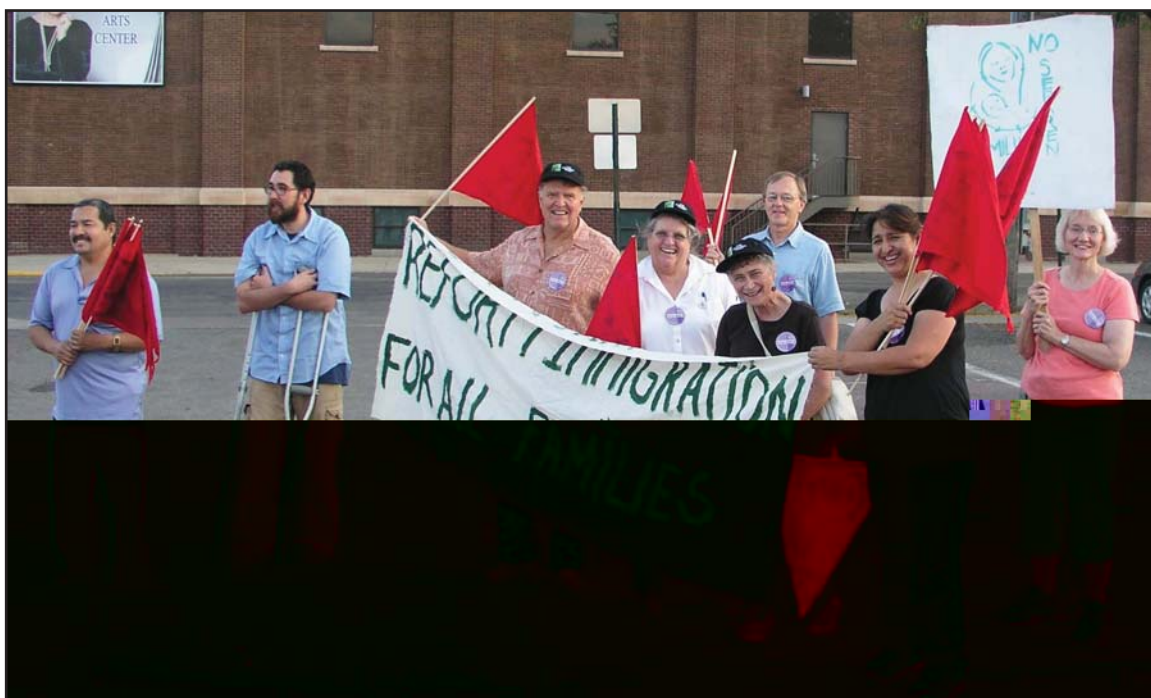
ture we want without the participation of immigrants and people of color similarly interested in a more fair and healthy food system?

→ Is it possible to tune-out the extreme anti-immigrant sentiment and pay more attention to the studies documenting the economic benefits of immigrants?

→ In light of research showing the monetary benefits immigrants bring to our communities, should we really be blaming them for our ailing economy?

LSP feels we need to tackle these and other questions related to immigrant workers head-on because it is the right thing to do. Creating a fair and just food system for all is an important part of our mission. But the reality is that if real change is to occur, self-interest—both as an organization and as individuals— is an important motivator. There’s nothing wrong with asking, “What’s in it for us?” if the answers to that question still lead us to positive change. In future issues of the *Land Stewardship Letter*, we will be addressing that very question. □

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Members of LSP and Centro Campesino teamed up during the “Journey of Hope Minnesota March for Immigration Reform” in Albert Lea, Minn., last September. (photo by Doug Nopar)