Talk given by Dr. Allen Webb

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Climate Change Knows No Borders

Or

Scapegoating Refugees, Migrants, and Undocumented People in Our Time of Climate Crisis

President Trump, Republican candidates, and some Democrats claimed during this past election that there has been a “migrant invasion” of our country. Closing the border, rounding up immigrants, putting them in camps, and undertaking mass deportation was a constant and broadly appealing refrain, one that built on years of blaming and scapegoating the weakest and most vulnerable people in our society – and the people who can’t vote - to the point where 84% of Republicans and 22% of Democrats support deporting all undocumented immigrants (Macis, 2024).

  Trump and other politicians called immigrants “criminals” and “rapists.” Yet a recent and extensive 6-year study in Texas showed that “undocumented immigrants are arrested at less than half the rate of native-born U.S. citizens for violent and drug crimes and a quarter the rate of native-born citizens for property crimes.” Moreover, undocumented immigrants had the lowest rates for felony crime, way below that of American citizens and even below that of documented immigrants (and documented immigrants were significantly less likely to commit crimes than American citizens) (Portocarrero, 2025).

Even without making a claim of refugee status, crossing the border without proper documents is a “misdemeanor.” Overstaying a visa is a civil, not a criminal offense.

Immigrants are also proclaimed to be costly for American taxpayers. Yet immigrants pay more in taxes than they receive in benefits. 2022, a year for which we have good data, undocumented immigrants in particular paid $59.4 billion in federal taxes and $37.3 billion in state and local taxes (ITEP, 2024).

More than a third of the tax dollars paid by undocumented immigrants goes toward payroll taxes funding Social Security, Medicare, and Unemployment Insurance. Yet, undocumented immigrants, including DACA holders, are ineligible to receive these federal benefits**,**and othersincluding SNAP benefits – that is food stamps, Medicaid, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). Undocumented immigrants are ineligible for health care subsidies under the Affordable Care Act (ACA) and are prohibited from purchasing unsubsidized health coverage on Affordable Care Act exchanges. Undocumented immigrants are often barred from receiving tax credits and often do not claim refunds they are owed due to lack of awareness or concern about their immigration status. Even legal immigrants use federal public benefit programs at lower rates than U.S.-born citizens (ITEP, 2024).

Is it surprising that in 40 states, undocumented immigrants pay higher state and local tax rates than households at the top 1 percent of income? (ITEP, 2024).

  In the anti-immigrant rhetoric, immigrants are described as taking jobs from native-born Americans, another false claim. In fact,higher immigration levels correspond to higher employment rates for native-born Americans. In 2023, at the time of the so-called “migrant invasion,” native-born employment in the United States increased by 740,000. Immigrants are also accused of increasing home prices, yet shortages of construction labor reduces the building of new homes, driving up prices. Expanding immigration, especially in sectors like construction addresses labor shortages and makes homes more affordable (Costa & Shierholz, 2024; Macis, 2024).

Urban areas, with more recent immigrants, have lower unemployment than rural areas with fewer immigrants. And, immigrants play a critical role in driving economic growth, entrepreneurship, and innovation, and are substantially more likely to start businesses than native-born individuals with similar characteristics. About half of all Fortune 500 companies were founded by immigrants or their children, and such contributions fuel the economy by creating jobs and boosting productivity. Immigrants without college degrees are more likely to start businesses than immigrants with college degrees (New American Economy, 2020).

President Trump leads the way in using frightening, demeaning, and racist language to describe immigrants. “They’re poisoning the blood of our country” he proclaims, using the same hideous phrase Adolf Hitler uses in *Mein Kampf* to describe the Jews. Trump has said,

They’re eating the dogs, the people that came in, they’re eating the cats. They’re eating the pets of the people that live there, and this is what’s happening in our country, and it’s a shame. (Hoffman, 2024)

‘Nancy Pelosi told me… ‘Please don’t use the word animals when you’re talking about these people.’ I said, ‘I’ll use the word animal because that’s what they are… they’re not humans, they’re not humans, they’re animals’ (ACLU, 2024).

  Is it surprising that a former senior Trump administration official foresees “the regular use of tear gas to repel migrants, the deployment of heat-ray technology to make asylum-seekers feel like their skin is on fire, or shoot-to-kill orders for anyone who rushes the U.S. border” (ACLU, 2024).

The federal deportation system is already massive; the Department of Homeland Security oversees more than 66,000 federal law enforcement officers, by far the largest of any single federal agency and half of all federal law enforcement officers across the country (ACLU, 2024). Trump’s threats will require a vast expansion Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) already massive police force to pull people out of their communities, homes, workplaces, and schools, tear apart families, and transport and house them in enormous immigrant detention camps. This monstrous plan is not only immoral, inhumane, and anti-American, it will, as many critics point out, cost huge sums of taxpayer money. It would be a massive crime against humanity.

But let’s put this issue of migrants, refugees, and undocumented people in a larger perspective. Since the beginning of life on earth plants and animals have migrated to find better environments. Migration is one of nature’s most important survival strategies. Human beings have always migrated. Over hundreds of thousands of years our ancestors migrated back and forth across Africa to adapt to changing climates, profoundly shaping human evolution. Eventually, 60-70,000 years ago modern humans migrated out of Africa to the other continents. More recently, Western European colonial migration including the forced movement of people via slavery, prisoners, and indentured servitude that displaced indigenous people and led to the current world of national states many of whose boundaries are simply those of former colonies. Indeed, human migration fundamentally created the world all of us are part of. Our presence in this room today and the diversity of our ancestors is testimony to the history of migration.

National borders are historically new, arbitrary, often connected to unjust histories, colonial rule and warfare. The border most under attention in our country is of course the border between the United States and Mexico. But that border was created by an entirely immoral and unjustified war, a war that led Abraham Lincoln to call for President Polk’s impeachment and for Henry David Thoreau to refuse to pay his taxes and go to jail in protest. The American army’s march to Mexico City and its capture from its final teenage military cadet defenders, “los niños heroes,” forced Mexico to give up half of its territory, including what is now the states of California, Arizona, New Mexico, Nevada, Colorado, Utah, Texas, and parts of Wyoming, Oklahoma, and Kansas. And Americans are troubled by Mexicans crossing back into their former country unjustly stolen from them? Moreover, many Mexicans have Native American heritages that predate the very idea of colonially imposed national borders.

Through the last century a mythology of national peoples as distinct, homogeneous groups has been created. Racist, jingoistic, and fascistic politicians create suspicion and mistrust of the “Other,” as not as good as “Us,” as dangerous “outsiders,” racially different, and not belonging to the national in-group.

Of course, we now know that 19th Century “scientific racism” is totally false. There are no distinct or homogeneous national races. The difference in DNA between East and West Africa is twice as great as the DNA difference between Europe and East Asia, China and Japan. We all have the same human ancestors and thus are most accurately thought of as one human family.

And, whether recognized by law or not, people have a fundamental right to migrate to safety and to a better way of life. In this dawning age of human-caused climate change we need to plan for how we will honor that fundamental right.

Already in 2023 according to the Pulse Survey more than 3 million Americans were displaced by climate events, particularly flooding and storms (Rumbach, 2023). These are internally displaced people, IDPs, that are also climate migrants, and those numbers will increase as the climate crisis rolls on. In Kalamazoo I know people who have already moved here to escape flooding in Florida, storms in Texas, and wildfire smoke in California.

Today most refugees and undocumented immigrants that have come to the United States from other countries don't first think of themselves as "climate refugees.” Usually, they have experienced living challenges or specific events that precipitate their leaving home. Yet leaving their homes may well have a climate dimension. Southern Mexico and Central America are epicenters for climate change created drought and storms, which have made life for small farmers difficult, even impossible. Wars and conflicts in the Middle East and Africa that have generated refugees can often be traced to climate events, particularly drought, as an instigating factor.

Indeed, climate change is impacting everywhere on earth.  It is hard to know where we are going.

Certainly, the earth is rapidly getting warmer. 2023 and 2024 are not only the hottest years on record but, according to the Greenland ice cores, the warmest years in the last 120,000 years (Rohde, 2025). In 2023 and 2024 human released greenhouse gases added heat to our planet at the rate of 9 atomic bombs *per second* (Webb, 2024). That’s a lot of heat. And still, the total of greenhouse gases released by humans every year continues to increase. 2024, the year that just ended, had the highest ever human-caused release of greenhouse gases. 2024 was also the first year that the overall average of global heating exceeded 1.5ºC above the preindustrial average – the 2100 target of the 2015 Paris Agreement. (1.62 ± .02ºC. (Rohde, 2025).)

On our present trajectory large sections of the world, including portions of the United States will become unlivable. People will be forced to move. First, they will be displaced in their own countries, then to other countries, and then to other regions. At least one estimate is that the climate crisis may displace more than a billion people by 2050. (Henley, 2020) Those suffering the most first are in the Global South, in areas that have made very little historical contribution to greenhouse gas emissions. Americans on the other hand have historically contributed the most of any country to cause global heating, 25% of all emissions, while being only 4% of world citizens. That’s 6 times per capita more than our share (Evans, 2021).

The issue of climate change and climate migration raises crucial questions of justice that Martin Luther King’s World House can help us understand and address.

Despite the Paris Agreement, the world is not adequately reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and neither the United Nations, nor any group of nations or organizations are adequately planning to support climate migrants. In the 2015 Encyclical Letter “Laudato si’: On Care for Our Common Home” Pope Francis addresses all people on earth, not just Catholics. He describes the impact of climate change on poor communities around the world and the desperate situation of climate refugees:

There has been a tragic rise in the number of migrants seeking to flee from the growing poverty caused by environmental degradation. They are not recognized by international conventions as refugees; they bear the loss of the lives they have left behind, without enjoying any legal protection whatsoever. Sadly, there is widespread indifference to such suffering, which is even now taking place throughout our world. Our lack of response to these tragedies involving our brothers and sisters points to the loss of that sense of responsibility for our fellow men and women upon which all civil society is founded (Francis, 2015).

Just as more than 50% of the human-released carbon in the atmosphere was put there in the last 30 years, we must collaborate with all other countries on earth to quickly transition to renewable energy, regenerative agriculture, and end the use of fossil fuels. The most recent report by the world’s leading climate scientists indicates that we have precious little time.

Unless there is a rapid end to fossil fuel burning, which the election of Donald Trump makes all the more unlikely, various positive feedback systems in the natural world are already in play, and the planet may well be heading not to 1.5ºC but to 3 or 4ºC of warming. At 4ºC I have seen predictions that in the Northern Hemisphere, where the most land is, life will only still be livable north of the 45th latitude, that is north of Kalamazoo and north of Traverse City, too. If it gets to 4º, we Americans will have to hope that Canadians will be welcoming climate refugees! (Vince, 2022).

Today, even as we pass Paris targets of 1.5 and 2º, it is not game over. Every tenth of a degree of warming matters. We do not want to get to 4º. One of the leading European climate scientists has said that the difference between 2ºC and 4ºC is human civilization.

It is possible to read America’s most recent presidential election at least in part through the lens of the climate crisis and see the attacks on immigrants, the calls for strengthening of borders, and the desire for a strong leader all as a response to climate anxiety and uncertainty, as a kind of eco- or climate-fascism, now also arising in many democracies and former democracies around the world. Rather than developing global brother and sisterhood, this climate fascism is based on a politics of exclusion, segregation, policing, repression, and arming.

            The approach of treating so-called “outsiders” as dangerous and militarizing borders in the face of the climate crisis Christian Parenti calls “the politics of the armed lifeboat.” A world of armed lifeboats is not a viable future. Parenti says climate fascism “based on exclusion, segregation, [and] repression is horrific and bound to fail.” He states,

If climate change is allowed to destroy whole economies and nations, no amount of walls, guns, barbed wire, armed aerial drones, or permanently deployed mercenaries will be able to save one half of the planet from the other. (Parenti, 2011, p.11)

Our global diplomacy and our policies toward climate migrants must take a different approach.

First, and above all, we must stop burning fossil fuels. Though fossil fuel companies and utilities have long been deceiving us, and continuing to deceive us, buying politicians to protect their subsidies, profits, and assets, the most hopeful dimension of the crisis is the tremendous advances in renewable energy and energy storage. Installing new solar power is now cheaper than continuing to operate existing fossil fuel plants (Gearino, 2023).

The bottom line is that we only have one planet. When we look over a vista or up at the sky our planet and atmosphere appear vast, but the truth is that our planet is barely a speck in space and our atmosphere is dramatically thin. Climate change is making it clear that we must learn how to share that beautiful speck of a planet with our brothers and sisters.

That sharing is going to lead to massive changes. Migration works best with cooperation rather than antagonism. In the Global North there are rapidly declining birthrates, and we need to recognize that accepting migrants strengthens rather than weakens our society. We must use our imagination not to be frightened by scary “Others,” but to conceive and build a survivable, sustainable, and cooperative world drawing on the diverse talents and energies of all of us, of all members of our human family.

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