

Welcoming the Migrant to the US¹

The Historical Context

From the dawn of creation human beings have migrated across the earth. The history of the United States is a migration narrative of families and individuals seeking safety, economic betterment, and freedom of religious and cultural expression. The reasons for those who immigrated willingly are numerous and varied depending on the context, but what all immigrants share is the promise of what they believe lies in another land other than their own. Migrants today continue to travel to North America because of the effects of globalization, dislocation, economic scarcity, persecution, and other reasons.

The arrival of migrants to the United States from so many parts of the world has also meant that there is a diversity of cultures and worldviews. The diversity of cultures, worldviews, and languages has placed an enormous strain upon migrants. To effectively deal with this trauma and ease the process of acculturation, migrants should be encouraged to preserve strong cultural and familial ties to their culture of origin.

The arrival of new cultures has also felt threatening to U.S. citizens and this has too often resulted in conflict and even violence. Throughout the history of the United States, the most recently-arrived group of migrants has often been a target of racism, marginalization, and violence. We regret any and all violence committed against migrants in the past and we resolve, as followers of Jesus, to work to eliminate racism and violence directed towards newly arriving migrants to the United States.

The Biblical and Theological Context

Reflecting upon the Scriptures, we are reminded that United Methodists are a global church. In the United States, we may be descendents of economic immigrants or forced migrants, or we may have recently arrived in the U.S. We may have formal documents proving U.S. citizenship, or we may be undocumented.

Regardless of legal status or nationality, we are all connected through Christ to one another. Paul reminds us that when “one member suffers, all members suffer” as well (1 Corinthians 12:26). The solidarity we share through Christ eliminates the boundaries and barriers which exclude and isolate. Therefore, the sojourners we are called to love are our brothers and sisters, our mothers and fathers, our sons and daughters; indeed, they are us.

Throughout Scripture the people of God are called to love sojourners in our midst, treating them “as the citizen among you” and loving them as we do ourselves (Leviticus 19:33-34). Love for the sojourner is birthed out of the shared experience the Israelites had as a people in sojourn searching for the Promised Land. The attitudes and actions required of God’s people were to emanate from the reflection of their liberation from slavery by God’s hand. As the people of God were liberated from oppression, they too were charged to be instruments of redemption in the lives of the most vulnerable in their midst - the sojourner (Exodus 22:21, 23:9; Leviticus 19:34; Deuteronomy 10:19, 16:12, 24:18, 24:22).

In the New Testament Jesus’ life begins as a refugee to Africa when he and his family flee to Egypt to escape Herod’s infanticide (Matthew 2:13-18). Jesus fully identifies with the sojourner to the point that to welcome the sojourner is to welcome Jesus himself (Matthew 25:35). Jesus teaches us to show special concern for the poor and oppressed who come to our land seeking survival and peace.

In Scripture, Jesus continually manifests compassion for the vulnerable and the poor. Jesus incarnated hospitality as he welcomed people and ministered to their greatest need. Jesus’ presence on earth initiated the Kingdom reality of a new social order based on love, grace, justice, inclusion, mercy, and egalitarianism, which was meant to replace the old order, characterized by nepotism, racism, classism, sexism, and exclusion. The broken immigration system in the United States and the xenophobic responses to migrants reflect the former social order. The calling of the people of God is to advocate for the creation of a new immigration system that reflects Jesus’ beloved community.

¹ *The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church*: 2008. Resolution 3281, pp. 412-20

The fear and anguish so many migrants in the United States live under are due to federal raids, indefinite detention, and deportations which tear apart families and create an atmosphere of panic. Millions of immigrants are denied legal entry to the U.S. due to quotas and race and class barriers, even as employers seek their labor. U.S. policies, as well as economic and political conditions in their home countries, often force migrants to leave their homes. With the legal avenues closed, immigrants who come in order to support their families must live in the shadows and in intense exploitation and fear. In the face of these unjust laws and the systematic deportation of migrants instituted by the Department of Homeland Security, God's people must stand in solidarity with the migrants in our midst.

In Scripture, sojourners are also identified as heralds or messengers bringing good news. This is seen in many stories of the Bible:

- Abraham who welcomed three visitors and then was promised a child even though Sarah was past the age of bearing children (Genesis 18:-11);
- Rahab who hid the spies from Israel and whose family was ultimately spared (Joshua 2:1-16);
- the widow at Zarephath who gave Elijah her last meal and received food and ultimately healing for her dying son (1 Kings 17:7-24); and
- Zaccheus who, upon welcoming Jesus into his home, promised to share half his possessions with the poor and repay those he stole from four times the amount owed. As Jesus entered Zaccheus' home he proclaimed that salvation had come to his house (Luke 19:1-10).

All of these stories give evidence to the words of the writer of Hebrews who advises the listeners to "not neglect to show hospitality to strangers for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it" (13:2). God's people are called to welcome the sojourner not only because of God's commands to do so, but because God's people need to hear the good news of the gospel incarnated in their stories and in their lives. Welcoming the sojourner is so vital to the expression of Christian faith that to engage in this form of hospitality is to participate in our own salvation.

There is theologically and historically an implied nature of mutuality in migration. Both the migrant and the native are meant to benefit from migration. Welcoming the migrant is not only an act of mission; it is an opportunity to receive God's grace. The globalization of international economies and the continuing movement of migrants have created an increasingly diversified U.S. population and should be reflected in United Methodist congregations and national church leadership.

Therefore, The United Methodist Church understands that at the center of Christian faithfulness to Scripture is the call we have been given to love and welcome the sojourner. We call upon all United Methodist churches to welcome newly arriving immigrants in their communities, to love them as we do ourselves, to treat them as one of our native-born, to see in them the presence of the incarnated Jesus, and to show hospitality to the migrants in our midst believing that through their presence we are receiving the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Current Context

Immigration to the United States has changed in the last 20 years largely because the world has changed. Globalization has lessened the geographical distance between the poor and affluent, but yet, it has also greatly exacerbated the chasm between those with access to resources and those denied that same access. Vast inequities between the global north and south are a continuing source of conflict and a draw of resources and people from the south to north. Globalization has localized issues which used to be hidden or detached by geographical boundaries, but has not created forms of accountability or mediated the necessity of cross-cultural reconciliation between those victimized by international economic policies and those who benefit from them. Global media enable the poor of the global south to see the lifestyles of the affluent in the global

north, while rarely seeing the intense poverty that also exists there. This creates both tensions and a draw to attain that same lifestyle.

Although unregulated trade and investment have economically benefited some, many more have been sentenced to a lifetime of poverty and marginalization. In poorer countries natural resources have been removed by transnational corporations which have no stake in the continuing welfare of the local people, the enhancement of their cultural traditions, or their ecological environment. The lack of these resources often leads to a drastic reduction in jobs, wages, and labor protections. Public social benefits are eliminated and the nation sinks deeper into debt as it turns to such institutions as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund.² As the affluent North continues to expand its wealth, this expansion occurs at the expense of the impoverished South. Every region in the world is affected in some way by the global economic divide. Yet, while money and products easily flow across borders, the movement of people who have been forced to migrate because of intolerable economic conditions is increasingly restricted.

When those, whose livelihoods have been eradicated in favor of corporate globalization, attempt to sojourn to North America to work and provide for their families, they receive a mixed message that is confusing and ultimately oppressive. Immigrants have moved into areas of the United States where there are economic opportunities that U.S. citizens have largely ignored. Employers often prefer undocumented workers in order to increase profit margins. Until all jobs provide a livable wage employers will be able to pit U.S. citizens against undocumented workers in a downward spiral that undermines the labor rights for all.

Because the U.S. immigration system has not kept up with the changing pace of immigration and the U.S. economy, the population of undocumented immigrants has grown dramatically. Yet, the growing population of undocumented immigrants has not yet been harmful to most U.S. workers because they are not competing for the same jobs. While the United States labor force is growing older and more educated, the need for unskilled workers remains strong. The Migration Policy Institute reports that the economic necessities for repairing the immigration system are clear as they predict by 2030, immigrant workers will comprise between one-third and one-half of the U.S. labor force.³ Testifying before the Senate Committee on Aging in 2003, then-Chairman of the Federal Reserve Board, Alan Greenspan, called for increased immigration of migrants to sustain an aging labor force and a continued economic vacuum among low-skilled workers.

Although the economic necessity of migrant workers is clear, any immigration or economic system which calls for a perpetual class of second class workers cannot be supported by people of faith. Undocumented immigrants are exploited for their labor and economic contribution to the United States. They are denied their rights to collectively bargain for livable wages and safe working conditions, and they are shut out of access to the social services of which they support through their difficult labor. Any reform of the immigration system must also allow for the full protections of all workers which includes the opportunity to gain legal status for all migrants.

Even though migrants have proven a tremendous benefit to the United States' economy, migrants have been systematically excluded from receiving any benefits. Excluding access to health care promotes an increase in the demand on emergency rooms to provide that daily care or it forces migrants who are fearful to seek medical care to live in continued pain and suffering. The United States benefits from migrant labor, but migrants have been forced to live in the shadows, unable to fully contribute or receive appropriate care.

Immigration: A Human Rights Issue

Since 9/11 the debate surrounding immigration has unfortunately been framed as an issue of national security. All of this emphasis on border security has not stemmed the flow of undocumented migration even though the United States has poured millions of dollars into militarizing the border.

² Moe-Lobeda, Cynthia D. *Healing a Broken World: Globalization and God*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, p. 28.

³ B. Lindsay Lowell, Julia Gelatt & Jeanne Batalove, *Immigrants and Labor Force Trends: The Future, Past, and Present*. Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, July 2006, p. 1.

The use of local law enforcement as immigration agents should be stopped as well. When local law enforcement officials engage in immigration enforcement, immigrants are often unwilling to report crimes and are forced to live in situations where they are exploited, abused, and victimized.

All nations have the right to secure their borders, but the primary concern for Christians should be the welfare of immigrants. Between 1995 and 2004 more than 2,640 migrants have died crossing the border between the United States and Mexico, and since 2004 more than one migrant has died per day.⁴

Raids of workplaces, homes and other social places have often violated the civil liberties of migrants. Migrants should be given due process and access to adequate legal representation. Due to these raids and the ensuing indefinite detentions and deportations that follow them, families have been ripped apart and the immigrant community has been forced to live in a constant state of fear.

To refuse to welcome migrants to this country – and to stand by in silence while families are separated, individual freedoms are ignored, and the immigrant community in the United States is demonized by members of Congress and the media – is complicity to sin.

A Call to Action

The United Methodist Church affirms the worth, dignity and inherent value and rights of every person regardless of their nationality or legal status. United Methodist churches throughout the United States are urged to build bridges with immigrants in their local communities, to learn from them, celebrate their presence in the United States and recognize and appreciate the contributions in all areas of life that immigrants bring. We call upon all United Methodist churches to engage in the following:

- advocate for legislation that will uphold the civil and human rights of all migrants in the United States and provide an opportunity to attain legal status for all undocumented migrants for those currently in the United States as well as for those arriving in the future;
- begin English as a Second Language classes as a part of ministry to migrant communities and advocate for federal and state support of expanded ESL classes;
- denounce and oppose the rise of xenophobic, racist, and violent reactions against migrants in the United States, and to support all efforts to build relationships between people, instead of building walls, between diverse ethnicities and cultures;
- oppose the building of a wall between the United States and Mexico, which the communities of both sides of the border are in opposition to;
- call the United States government to immediately cease all arrests, detainment, and deportations of undocumented immigrants, including children, solely based upon their immigration status until a fair and comprehensive immigration reform is passed;
- provide wherever possible pastoral care and crisis intervention to refugees and newly arrived migrants, identifying and responding compassionately to their spiritual, material, and legal needs;
- work with civic and legal organizations to support migrant communities affected by harsh immigration laws and over-reaching national security measures;
- support those churches that prayerfully choose to offer sanctuary to undocumented immigrants facing deportation;
- continue the work of the Immigration Task Force composed of staff from the general boards and agencies, representatives of the Council of Bishops, and members of caucuses and national plans that was created by the resolution, "Opposition to the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigration Resolution Act" (2004 *Book of Resolutions*, #118).

⁴ Wayne Cornelius, *Evaluating Enhanced US Border Enforcement*. Migration Policy Institute, May 2004.

Further, The United Methodist Church is urged to advocate for the comprehensive reform of the U.S. immigration system. Any legislation to reform the U.S. immigration system must affirm the worth, dignity and inherent value and rights of migrants, and must also include:

- an opportunity for legal status for all undocumented migrants. Any pathway created for undocumented migrants should have minimal obstacles and those requirements should not be designed to preclude migrants from eligibility for legalization;
- clearing the backlogs and reunifying families separated by migration or detention;
- an increase in the number of visas for short-term workers to come into the United States to work in a safe, legal, and orderly way. Opportunities for legalization should be available for those who wish to remain permanently;
- the protections of all workers who come to stay for a certain period of time as well as for those who stay permanently. The right to bargain for higher wages, to protest against poor working conditions, and to preserve their human rights should be maintained by all workers, documented and undocumented alike;
- elimination of privately-operated detention centers, which are not regulated by the federal or state governments⁵;
- elimination of indefinite detention, incarceration of children, and the expanding prison population, which also benefits privately-owned detention centers and prisons;
- preservation of due process and access to courts and to adequate legal representation for all migrants regardless of legal status.

⁵ In the 2004 *Book of Resolutions* "Prison Industrial Complex," it states that "Many states where private prisons are now operating have no laws regulating their operations (including health, safety, security, legal access to prisoners, and disciplinary policies). Many private prisons are under no obligation to ensure access to information about prisoners held in them or how they are classified, and often regard this as proprietary information."