

## 2014 RESOLUTION ON IMMIGRATION

### Introduction

In remembrance of our denomination's history, at the 125th anniversary celebration of the Evangelical Covenant Church in 2010 we affirmed that we began as an immigrant church and celebrated that today we continue to be an immigrant church.<sup>1</sup> The early immigrants of the Covenant Church faced profound challenges as they entered a new nation. These Covenant ancestors were strengthened in their journey through faith in Jesus Christ, who was no stranger to the experiences of immigrants.

We want to consider how both our history as an immigrant church in an immigrant nation and our biblically rooted faith in Jesus Christ may speak prophetically to our present context. How does our history and our common faith inform how we understand the difficult and complex issues surrounding immigration? How do we in the church engage the immigration conversation distinctly *as Christians*? How do we resist the political ideologies, fear, and stereotypes that keep us from engaging in thoughtful, informed dialogue?

This resolution is about reframing the conversation about immigration, both within our churches and in our communities. It is about helping us address issues of immigration from a Christian perspective as biblically informed people. As the Covenant Resource Paper on Compassion, Mercy, and Justice reminds us, the church must pursue God's justice by asking, "How do we join God in making things right in our broken world?"

### Biblical Foundation

The Bible tells us that all people, regardless of national origin or citizenship status, are made in the image of God and must be treated with dignity and respect (Genesis 1:26-27).

In the Old Testament, God's relationship with humanity centers on a covenant with an immigrant, Abraham, and his descendants, the people of Israel, whose famine-induced migration to Egypt led to their enslavement. When God liberated them they set out as immigrants in hope toward a land "flowing with milk and honey" (Exodus 3:7-10).

After Israel settled into the land of Canaan, God commanded that "the foreigners residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt" (Leviticus 19:33-34).<sup>2</sup> This command reflects God's character as the one who "loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing" (Deuteronomy 10:18). God's concern and care for the immigrant runs throughout the Law and the Prophets, guiding the people when they were settled in their homeland and when they were in exile, a minority population working to remain faithful in a strange land (Exodus 23:9; Numbers 15:14; Deuteronomy 24:21; 26:12; Psalm 146:9; Jeremiah 7:6; Ezekiel 22:7; Zechariah 7:10; Malachi 3:5).

The book of Ruth shows these commands in action, telling the story of Ruth the Moabite, a widow who left her homeland, culture, and religion for the unknown land, people, and God of her Israelite mother-in-law, Naomi. Displaced, grieving, and vulnerable, Ruth survived on the kindness of her adopted people, eventually remarried, and became a full member of the community.

Jesus, a descendant of Ruth (Matthew 1:5), began his life as a sojourner, journeying in the womb to Bethlehem by political decree, and then fleeing to Egypt with his parents after his birth to escape political violence (Luke 2:1-7; Matthew 2:13). His ministry was marked by care for the poor and marginalized, often crossing borders, stretching boundaries, and challenging unjust laws in the process (John 4; Luke 15:21-28; Matthew 12:1-14). Jesus also took the Old Testament commands a step further, saying, "I was a stranger and you invited me in" (Matthew 25:35). His death reconciled humanity with

<sup>1</sup> "Now, as Then, We Are an Immigrant Church," <http://CovChurch.tv/am2010-immigrant-church>

<sup>2</sup> Scripture taken from the New International Version.

God and created a new family that included non-Israelites who had been “separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise” (Ephesians 2:12).

As the church spread throughout the Roman Empire, it showed hospitality to strangers and foreigners (Hebrews 13:2), and shared the good news of Jesus with people of all nationalities and social classes. Early Christians wrestled with the challenges of being citizens of heaven and citizens of local cities, regions, and nations. On the one hand, they were instructed to “be subject to the governing authorities....[who] hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong” (Romans 13:1-3; cf. 1 Peter 2:13-17). They recognized that respecting government authorities and the law promoted Christian witness. On the other hand, early Christians also knew the teaching of the prophets that legal structures are sometimes a source of injustice (Amos 5:12-15; Micah 7:2-3) and that God calls his people to speak up for reform (Isaiah 10:1-4; Jeremiah 7:1-7). Their experience also showed that there were times when civil disobedience was required for the sake of the gospel, times when “we must obey God rather than human beings” (Acts 5:29). Ultimately, they looked forward to the New Jerusalem, a city in which “the nations will walk by its light....On no day will its gates ever be shut” (Revelation 21:24-25).

### **Immigration Reality**

Throughout history, people have migrated. Whether for reasons of opportunity, interest, asylum, poverty, or oppression, human beings are “people on the move.” Regardless of causes, migration is usually traumatic, separating people from their native homes, communities, and cultures. Migration also poses difficult questions for host communities and nations as they discern how to respond to immigrants in their midst.

The United States<sup>3</sup> has a complicated history in regard to welcoming the immigrant and foreigner. On the one hand, immigration has created a rich mosaic of people who have contributed significantly to our cultural, economic, and spiritual life. We are a nation of immigrants, and according to the Census Bureau, forty million foreign-born persons currently live in the United States, making up 13 percent of the population.<sup>4</sup> Since 1975, the United States has also welcomed more than three million refugees.<sup>5</sup> A plaque within the Statute of Liberty proclaims, “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.” However, U.S. history also includes the permanent displacement of the only people who did not immigrate to this land, the Native Americans, through sanctioned killing and broken treaties, as well as the forced migration and brutal enslavement of generations of Africans. Recent waves of immigrants to the United States have often been subject to unjust hiring practices and attitudes, especially during times of national economic challenge.

When the people who first formed the Evangelical Covenant Church came to the United States from Sweden in the late nineteenth century, federal immigration law as we know it did not exist. Many who immigrated were able to start new lives in the United States without a visa. The first significant prohibitions to immigration occurred when Asian immigrants were prevented from becoming citizens with the passage of the Naturalization Act of 1870, followed by the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which banned immigration from China. Over the next four decades the United States also passed laws preventing entry of the sick and illiterate. In 1921 and 1924 Congress passed quotas that made it extremely difficult to immigrate, particularly for those outside of northern and western European countries. In 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson overhauled the policies, making immigration law based on family connections and employability.

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<sup>3</sup> Even though the ECC is composed of churches in both the United States and Canada, this resolution only addresses U.S. immigration in order to contain and clarify one national conversation on immigration. We acknowledge that Canada and other countries also have important and varied realities when it comes to the context for acting out our faith in response to questions about immigration.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.state.gov/j/prm/migration/index.htm>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.state.gov/j/prm/ra/index.htm>

Current U.S. immigration law is very complex, often arbitrarily enforced, and has resulted in more than eleven million people living and working in the United States who are considered “undocumented” or without legal status. Our immigration system provides limited legal ways for people to flee poverty or war, and does not take into account the high demand for jobs (both “high-skilled” and “low-skilled”) in the United States.<sup>6</sup> The current system also suffers from a backlog of family reunification applications, resulting in long waits that divide families for as many as ten to twenty years, and unintended and unjust consequences related to black market documents, crowded detention centers, and human trafficking.<sup>7</sup>

Faith leaders from across the theological spectrum, along with a growing number of business leaders and politicians, all agree that current immigration law needs to be reformed. According to the Evangelical Immigration Table: “Our national immigration laws have created a moral, economic and political crisis in America. Initiatives to remedy this crisis have led to polarization and name calling in which opponents have misrepresented each other’s positions as open borders and amnesty versus deportations of millions. This false choice has led to an unacceptable political stalemate at the federal level at a tragic human cost.”<sup>8</sup> Speaking to the Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration, Leith Anderson, president of the National Association of Evangelicals, noted, “The current backlog in family reunification petitions, with waiting periods stretching into years and even decades, is shortsighted and immoral. It causes much suffering and tempts desperate people to work around our laws where our system offers no realistic possibilities for timely family reunion.”<sup>9</sup>

### **The Call**

As Christians we are called to be salt and light in the national discourse on immigration by imitating Christ’s spirit of compassion and hospitality alongside an appropriate respect for the law. Our dialogue on immigration should reflect that we are talking about human beings and families loved by God and for whom Christ died. At its core, the immigration debate is about real people, many of whom are members of our Covenant family—mothers, fathers, children, grandmothers, and grandfathers, each with their own walk of faith and story to share. The church should challenge the dehumanization of any person, whether it is occurring in political policies, the media, in our churches, or around the water cooler. This includes examining how we speak of immigration and the words we use to describe immigrants. This may lead to asking different questions than those within the political debates, such as:

- How can we address these issues from a biblical foundation?
- How can we show hospitality to and care for immigrants regardless of legal status as people made in the image of God?
- How do we balance care for people while respecting the rule of the law?
- How can we advocate for ethical immigration policy?
- How can we acknowledge the positive contributions of immigrants who “seek the welfare” of their newfound homes (Jeremiah 29:4-7)?

### **The Response**

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<sup>6</sup> For example, only 10,000 employer-sponsored workers are allowed to enter the country legally each year for jobs that do not require a high degree of education or training.

<sup>7</sup> *Welcoming the Stranger: Discovering and Living God’s Heart for Immigrants* (National Association of Evangelicals and World Relief), p.38.

<sup>8</sup> The Evangelical Immigration Table, Evangelical Statement of Principles for Immigration Reform, <http://evangelicalimmigrationtable.com> (signed by nearly 200 evangelical leaders, including ECC President Gary Walter).

<sup>9</sup> Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration, Border Security and Refugees, Hearing on Faith Based Community Perspectives on Comprehensive Immigration Reform (Oct. 8, 2009), <http://www.judiciary.senate.gov/pdf/10-08-09%20Anderson%20testimony.pdf>.

As followers of Christ who was himself a “stranger with no place to lay his head,” we are invited to advocate for the vulnerable and marginalized among us as an act of discipleship. We are reminded by the Covenant’s 2004 Resolution on Kingdom Values and Global Citizenship, that “being the by-product of immigrant movements we have, when at our best, extended compassion to the sojourner and the stranger.”

Therefore, be it resolved that the 129<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Covenant Church calls Covenant churches and Covenanters to:

- 1) Allow our worship and our biblical story to prepare us for healthy, Christian dialogue about immigration.
- 2) Enter into meaningful relationships with immigrant neighbors and immigrant churches by creating a safe space to share and hear stories.
- 3) Pray and advocate for our sisters and brothers who are caught in and suffer from the complexities of our current immigration system, as well as our lawmakers and immigration enforcement personnel.
- 4) Advocate for fair and humane immigration laws and policies that:
  - foster respect for the rule of law and border control;
  - establish law enforcement initiatives that are consistent with humanitarian values;
  - reform the family-based immigration system to reduce waiting times and reunite separated families;
  - advocate for the end of profiling actions that diminish personhood and create a culture of fear and division within society;
  - expand legal avenues for workers to enter the United States and work in a safe and legal manner with their rights and due process fully protected;
  - address the needs of the estimated 11 million people who are currently undocumented by creating a path toward legal immigration status or citizenship for those who qualify and satisfy specific criteria; and
  - advocate for labor laws that protect immigrants of any legal standing from exploitative labor conditions and human trafficking.
- 5) Support international development organizations, such as Covenant World Relief, Covenant World Mission, Bread for the World, and others that address the root causes of migration from a biblical perspective, including the economic disparities between sending and receiving nations, and the life-threatening realities of violence and poverty around the globe.