

The Free Methodist Position on Immigration (Condensed)

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The Christian is squarely in the Hebraic tradition which welcomes and cares for the immigrants among us. Although conscious of His specific purpose among His Hebrew family, our Lord consistently elevated the worth of persons of all nationalities (Syrians and Sidonians, the Italian centurion, the Syrophoenician woman, the Samaritan woman, etc.) and His final instructions to the church focused on other ethnicities (Mt 28:19-20). The apostolic record in the book of the Acts is of the good news crossing the boundaries of economic class, geography, language, gender, and ethnicity.

The primary source of tension in the immigration debate comes when the Christian's desire to care for all persons clashes with our respect for the rights of the state to establish laws, including economic policy. The Christian radically accepts all people as created in the "*imago Dei*." But in certain cases this acceptance of all will clash with immigration laws that are based on citizenship, if those laws disadvantage societal segments. The state will tend to side with protecting its citizen's economic interest while the Christian will tend to side with protecting the innate equality of *all* people: hence the tension.

This is compounded by the current unfortunate reality that the U.S. population also includes a large class of immigrants who are undocumented (probably some 11 million), primarily because of the quota system that limits menial-worker visas by country-of-origin. Undoubtedly there are criminals and scoundrels among the undocumented workers, but the vast majority have braved untold dangers and risked their meager savings to come to the U.S. to work for us. They know they are breaking the law, yet intuitively recognize the inconsistencies between U.S. law, which criminalizes them, and the U.S. economy that depends on them as a significant labor source and continues to hire them. They are largely forced into the underground economy and the invisible world which is afraid to access health care, police protection, schools, retirement programs, the welfare system, and churches. This invisible world also, incidentally, is the context in which human trafficking thrives.

Legislation has several times been proposed in the U.S. during the past decade (2006, 2007, and 2012) to provide a guest-worker program, so there could be a legal pathway for temporary workers (like the Bracero program that operated in the US from 1942 To 1964) but the proposals have not become law. This means that many of our least-desirable jobs (produce harvesting, protein processing, hotel/restaurant back-of-house, and construction) continue to be filled by undocumented workers. These are jobs which birthright Americans often will not take at any wage.

Biblical Orientation

God has persistently commanded His people to treat the sojourners and foreigners with justice and compassion. From the earliest Mosaic commandments through the New Testament, God pushes His people toward a particular care for those who do not "belong," and who are therefore vulnerable.

The Hebrews were often reminded that they had once been strangers, immigrants, without a home; therefore they were to empathize with others in that condition. The Hebraic history includes two extended periods during which the Israelites were immigrants: the 430 years in Egypt as well as the years of exile in Babylon and Assyria. Out of that collective memory, God gives them instructions to treat the foreigners among them with justice and to provide for their needs.

The light of the Gospel takes us beyond the economic and political causes of contemporary migration movements to see God's plan for all peoples and how the people of God should respond to these movements in compassionate service. It is an invitation to pursue a theological reflection that in the suffering and hopes of immigrants and refugees we discover the unity of the human family, the dignity of every person, and the presence of the Lord, who made Himself one with the immigrants when He said, *"I was a stranger and you welcomed me (Mt 25:35)."*

Therefore the followers of this "stranger," named Jesus, are distinguished by their disproportionate care for other strangers among them, as well as the vulnerable classes (widows, fatherless, etc.). When there is no "father" able to defend them, the church stands in their defense. Local Free Methodist churches are to be pro-active; actively looking for those who are different, who are not like "us," and then being responsive to their needs.

Hospitality

The people of God are a hospitable people. The practice of hospitality characterizes, in practical ways, what it means to *"love your neighbor as yourself."* The apostles Peter, Paul, and John all urge us to be hospitable (Romans 12:13; 1 Timothy 5:10; Hebrews 13:2; 1 Peter 4:9; 3 John 1:8) both to the household of faith as well as to strangers.

The Church has historically emphasized the role of hospitality with the saying, *"Hospes venit, Christus venit"*: When a guest comes, Christ comes. We should welcome every guest to our door, our church, and our country with the same hospitality with which we would welcome Christ.

Hospitality is an offering to those unable to reciprocate. As Jesus says in Luke 14:14, *"You will be blessed because they can't repay you."* Hospitality has overtones of the hospital, of care for the weak, broken, and diseased. As Jesus says in Matthew 25:36, *"I was sick and you took care of me."* Hospitality is not self-serving, it's other-serving. It will involve sacrifice, risk, and even identification with the strangers.

The word we translate as "hospitality" from the Greek manuscripts is Φιλοξενία (philoxenia) and literally means, "love of strangers." The Biblical and Christian concept of true hospitality - how we treat needy strangers - might shame us as we realize that our hospitality is often something more self-serving than this sacrificial "love of strangers."

Obeying the Laws

Law-abiding citizens are often uneasy when confronted with undocumented workers or even when encouraged to challenge current immigration policy. We note that the Mosaic instructions concerning foreigners didn't contemplate foreigners who were "illegally" living among them. Some are therefore unsure how to apply the scriptural admonitions about care for the foreigners when such care seems to conflict with public policy.

We're also reminded that the Apostle Peter calls for submission to the state: "*Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, or to governors...*" (1 Peter 2:13-14). The Apostle Paul similarly calls us to respect the state's authority in Romans 13. Yet we quickly note that both Peter and Paul disobeyed the state. Paul was often arrested and punished by civic authorities, and probably was executed by the state as a lawbreaker. That is, these very apostles who advocated for respect for the state and its law readily disobeyed it when those laws conflicted with the higher principles of God. Underlying their assertions about submission to the state is an understanding that even though we always *submit* to the state, we *obey* the state only when the state's policies do not conflict with higher principles -- when they don't require sub-Christian behavior from us.

Our central commandment in both Testaments is to love God and our neighbor. When pressed as to who our neighbor might be, Jesus told the convicting story of a good neighbor who turned out to be an unwanted immigrant from a nearby, despised country. This Good Samaritan was an undesirable who, had the Hebrews had a legislative majority, would surely have been restricted by immigration policy from being on that road from Jerusalem to Jericho. Ironically, this immigrant was the one who understood how to love his neighbor.

Sample Action Steps

With regards to ministry with immigrants:

- we willingly serve all persons we encounter, regardless of migratory status; such differences do not affect the spiritual equality of all people.
- we ensure soul care for immigrants, ensuring that they are able to worship and hear the story of Jesus in ways they can understand.
- we invite immigrants into our homes and spend time in their homes.
- we assist with language acquisition, such as offering ESL classes.
- we provide food, watching for and responding to cases of hunger.
- we help with basic needs such as furniture and appliances. As food stamps and other government food programs often may be used for food alone, immigrants may have other basic needs like toilet paper, toothpaste, soap, etc.
- we actively seek out children who have been distanced from family by the deportation of undocumented parents and provide focused care for them.

- we give guidance in navigating governmental realities, such as obtaining drivers licenses, getting health care, translating of documents, and completing residency and citizenship classes.
- we promote cultural awareness by teaching and learning about cultural differences, and by helping immigrants understand how and why things work in this new world (approach to time, responses to authority, safety for children, etc.).
- we provide venues to interact with both documented and undocumented immigrants to understand their stories and where they come from: their needs, hopes, and dreams.
- we respect the right of governments to restrict immigration but also are eager for fresh-start opportunities to be extended to those who come from countries that have had poor governance.
- we advocate for creating conditions in native lands which would make immigration unnecessary.
- we advocate for public policy that increases the embracing mechanisms of immigration law, to the degree that they don't drain other countries of highly skilled persons needed to lift those countries to a higher state of well-being.
- we oppose public policy that encourages (even unintentionally) the creation of a class of undocumented workers by restricting immigration of those workers that sections of our economy rely upon.
- we communicate with our legislators and in the public forum (letters to the editor, etc.) advocating for immigration reform.
- we understand that ecclesial functions are granted by God, not the state, so we do not cede ecclesial functions to the state. This means that we offer the sacraments, conduct marriages, perform funerals, and ordain ministers without consideration of their immigration status. The appointment of ministers is a separate matter.
- we ensure that the Free Methodist Church ordination requirement of "cross-cultural education" contains training in working with the immigrant population.

The full document is available at: <http://fmcusa.org/files/2014/03/The-Free-Methodist-Church-on-Immigration.pdf>