

Atlanta 2003 Immigration Statement Congregational Resources

Strangers No More

These resources will help congregations carry out the actions suggested by the Atlanta 2003 Mennonite Church USA Churchwide Statement on Immigration.

Background

Mennonites have a reputation for generosity of spirit and resources, for helping those we meet who are in need. Perhaps this comes from our beginnings in the 1500s as a people on the run from the government, hiding where we could, depending on the community for sustenance. We helped each other out of love and compassion, because that is what God called us to do for each other. Hospitality is a natural gift of God, coming through the hands and hearts of members of the church.

Most of us came to this country as immigrants or slaves, and again, often depended on our church community to help us begin new lives. Our reasons for immigration have varied: religious persecution, economic opportunity, joining loved ones. And we have learned to pass on to others the generous hospitality we have received. Many of our congregations have sponsored immigrant families, housing and clothing them, teaching them English, helping them find jobs and in return being inspired and enlivened by the newcomers' perseverance and faith. Immigrants have been drawn to Mennonite theology, and members of our congregations speak dozens of languages.

Recent United States legislation, events since September 11, 2001 and concerns about the status of immigrants in this country led to the creation of the 2003 Mennonite Church USA Churchwide Statement on Immigration. The statement concludes:

We reject our country's mistreatment of immigrants, repent of our silence, and commit ourselves to act with and on behalf of our immigrant brothers and sisters, regardless of their legal status.

Scriptural wisdom

Our biblical understanding about our relationship with immigrants comes from both story and teaching. When we read these two types of biblical writing, we see that God has called our Christian community to build welcoming bridges, not walls, between immigrants and us. When

we take the step to join the community of Christ, we hear the call of God to welcome the stranger.

Both the Old and New Testament stories encourage us to "entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it." (Hebrews 13:2) In Genesis, Abraham and Lot lavishly entertained visitors, who only later disclosed that they are angels. (Genesis 18:1-33, 19:1-3) Job asserted, "no stranger had to spend the night in the street, for my door was always open to the traveler." (Job 31:32) And which of us,

My great-great-grandparents came to the U.S. on a boat in June 1878 and were welcomed. The United States wanted people to settle the lands. They strongly encouraged Anglo migration to Texas because they didn't want to give the Mexicans—who had lived here long before Texas took over—the upper hand. My great-great-grandparents wound up in Kansas. Native tribes were displaced with their coming. It wasn't like any of these people had poor intentions against anyone, but by their coming they created suffering for other people. I think we need to be cognizant of when we create suffering even through very indirect actions.

—Nathan Selzer, *Proyecto Libertad*, Harlingen, TX
from *Third Way Café's "Beyond the News"*
www.thirdway.com

every Advent, doesn't silently assert that we would have made room for poor pregnant Mary? Jesus, Mary, and Joseph soon fled for their lives, crossing borders and becoming refugees in Egypt. These Bible stories remind us repeatedly that God's people offer hospitality to strangers.

Biblical instruction sings the same melody: we are all members of one humanity, the family of God. On the most basic level, we are told to

offer hospitality (Romans 12:13, 1 Peter 4:9, 3 John 8) and that elders must be hospitable (Titus 1:8 and 1 Timothy 3:2). We are to “do good to all people” (Galatians 6:10), especially “those in prison and those who are mistreated, as if you yourselves were suffering.” (Hebrews 13:3)

As we dig more deeply into our understanding of the love and grace that Christ offers us, we come to realize that the reconciliation God has shown us is a gift to be given to others (Ephesians 2, 1 John 4). Love of God and love of neighbor are the most important commandments. And who is our neighbor? The story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) reminds us that we are to be good neighbors to each and every person, regardless of nationality, economic status, legal papers, or ethnicity. May the love of Christ bring us all together.

Preparing for the study

1. The statement adopted at Atlanta 2003 is available on www.MennoniteUSA.org or from Mennosource (800-245-7894, 616 Walnut Ave., Scottdale PA 15683-1999). Make copies for each member of the group for this study.
2. Also make copies of the MCC immigration biblical reflections (www.mcc.org/us/washington/issues/immigration/immigration_guide_reflection.html)

True Stories

AT 17, YESSICA left her home in Honduras, traveled by foot and bus through Guatemala, and huddled in garbage-filled freight cars to cross the U.S./Mexico border. She arrived in New York City to join her husband Julio, who had left Honduras months before to find work at a recycling company. Julio's employers paid less than minimum wage and ignored safety standards. In the winter, workers in the unheated building took turns warming up by a fire in a garbage container. Yessica and Julio spent years working hard and paying taxes before they were allowed to apply for Temporary Protected Status. Now as parents of three children and active members of United Revival Mennonite Church, Yessica and Julio call New York City home. In addition, Yessica is supporting her mother back in Honduras. “The only [financial] help my mom gets is from me,” she said. “If I go back, there'd be no one to help her.”

ERNESTO, 18, and his brother landed on the coast of Florida last fall in a boat with 200 other asylum seekers. Fleeing poverty and persecution in Haiti, they leaped from the boat and tried to splash ashore, but Ernesto's younger brother was picked up by the Coast Guard and immediately deported. Ernesto made it to shore where he was handcuffed and taken to the Krome Detention Center, notorious for abuses of asylum seekers. Three months later, an immigration judge granted Ernesto asylum; however, the INS (now the Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement) has appealed his case. Ernesto remains at Krome indefinitely. Florida Immigrant Advocacy Center and MCC service worker Sharon Ginter are working for his release. “I just keep wondering, why me?” wrote Ernesto. “What did I do? I'm so confused and down and depressed.”

—Sandra Perez, United Revival Mennonite Church

Bible study

Use these Bible passages as a basis to discuss the following questions.

Treatment of strangers

- Exodus 22: 21; 23:9; Leviticus 19:33-34 “Do not mistreat an alien.”
 - Deuteronomy 24:14-22; 27:19; Jeremiah 22:3 “Do not deprive the alien of justice.”
 - Matthew 25:31-46 “Whatever you did for the least of these...”
1. Perhaps this set of passages is quite familiar to your group. What old learnings come to mind when you read these all together? What new ideas? What concern of God's is the central idea of these passages?
 2. In what ways have members of your group lived these passages, either as strangers or as part of the welcoming community?
 3. The Atlanta 2003 theme was, “God's Table: Y'all Come.” How do these passages and this theme intersect with our understanding of who God is, and how our church then chooses to act?

Relationship to government

- 1 Peter 2:13-17 “Submit yourselves...to every authority... Show proper respect to everyone.”
 - 1 Timothy 2:1 Pray for all those in authority.
 - Romans 12:20-13:1; 13:8 Submit to governing authorities; “He who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law.”
 - Exodus 1: 15-22 The midwives disobey Pharaoh.
 - Daniel 3 & 6 Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refuse to bow to King Nebuchadnezzar; Daniel witnesses from the lions' den.
 - Esther 4-8 Esther's faithfulness saves her people
 - Acts 5:29 “We must obey God rather than men.”
 - Revelation 13 Government gone astray
1. The plaque on the Statue of Liberty reads, “Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!” How is the U.S. government doing at fulfilling these promises?
 2. What are the stated reasons for U.S. Immigration laws, policies, and their implementation? The unstated? Which have biblical basis? Which make you uncomfortable?
 3. How have these laws affected members of our Mennonite communities?
 4. When your understanding of God's grace and generosity is at odds with the laws of our land, where do you turn for guidance? Is it the role of government to decide to whom you should provide humanitarian assistance, such as giving a cup of cold water?
 5. The Immigration Statement offers eight actions for individuals and congregations to consider. Additional aids are on this handout. Look carefully at your community, your country. Which of these actions is God calling you and your congregation to?

The next step

End your time together by discussing your commitments to action and the next steps each person will take to implement the decision of the group. Pray that you find the energy and time to do so.

Resources for actions

These eight actions were suggested in the Immigration Statement. Resources for each arepearled.

1. Build relationships with the newcomers in our own communities. Facilitate the sharing of immigrants' stories and contributions in our churches and neighborhoods.
2. Plan learning tours in our communities that include immigrant neighborhoods, churches, and workplaces, as well as government offices that serve immigrants.
 - New Bridges Immigrant Resource Center hosts community immigration learning tours in Harrisonburg, VA. Contact Susannah Gerber Lepley, (540) 438-8295, newbridges@hotmail.com.
 - "In Exile—For A While," a refugee camp simulation, offers youth a glimpse into the daily hardships of refugees around the world. Contact Mennonite Central Committee, (717) 859-1151, www.mcc.org.
 - "The Great Free Trade Skit," an interactive roleplay by BorderLinks, explores the connections between immigration and globalization. Contact the MCC Washington Office, (202) 544-6564, mccwash@mcc.org or find it online at www.mcc.org/us/washington/lettersontheline/resources.html.
3. Partner with immigrant congregations to plan church services or community events.
 - Kingdom Builders is a Philadelphia-area network of 23 Anabaptist congregations that includes many immigrant churches. The congregations' various ministries include job-training centers, houses for homeless youth, English classes, Bible clubs, prison ministries, community gardens, and economic-development enterprises. Contact Leonard Dow, Oxford Circle Mennonite Church, (215) 519-6353.
4. Offer church facilities and volunteers for documentation services, English classes, ethnic celebrations, or other outreach programs.
 - The MCC Immigration Office offers two packets for congregations: "Welcoming the Newcomer: Doing Advocacy with Immigrants," and "Immigration Information Packet." The office also conducts periodic workshops on documentation, citizenship, the responsibilities of immigrant sponsors, and immigrant rights. Contact Rebeca Jimenez Yoder, (717) 859-1152, rjy@mcc.org, or order at www.mccstore.org.
5. Engage in mutual aid to offer food, shelter, clothing, and other resources to undocumented immigrants.
 - United Revival Mennonite Church in Brooklyn hosts the New York City Council of Mennonite Churches immigration program. In addition, the church collects clothes and food for undocumented members. Some members of the church also offer low-interest loans and assistance with tax forms. Contact Sandra Perez, sandra_perezus@yahoo.com.
6. Learn about issues affecting immigrants by reading newspapers or magazines, joining national immigration rights organizations, or contacting church agencies that work with immigration issues.
 - Third Way Café's "Beyond the News" section hosts a collection of insightful interviews with a variety of immigrants and church workers who work with immigrants. Visit www.thirdway.com.
 - MCC's Resource Catalog offers immigration-related videos with study guides, packets and posters, including "Between Two Worlds," a video by West Coast MCC on why immigrants choose to leave their homelands and journey to the United States.

The ABC's of immigration

The Mennonite Church USA churchwide statement on immigration uses the word "immigrant" to refer to all newcomers to the United States. Here are more precise definitions.

IMMIGRANT: A foreign-born individual who has been admitted as a lawful permanent resident (LPR) in the United States. An LPR can attain legal status through the family-sponsored or employment-based immigration systems. Current law allows 140,000 employment-based immigrant visas annually, and 226,000 family-sponsored visas for the relatives of LPR's. There is no cap on family-sponsored visas for the relatives of citizens.

NON-IMMIGRANT: An individual who is permitted to enter the U.S. temporarily for pleasure, business, study, diplomacy, or other purposes on an alphabet soup of visa categories.

UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRANT: A person present in the U.S. without the permission of the U.S. government. Undocumented immigrants enter the U.S. secretly or with false documents, or they overstay their legal visas. Immigrant advocates use the word "undocumented" instead of "illegal" in reference to immigrants to recognize the injustice of criminalizing human migration.

REFUGEE: A person outside the U.S. who seeks protection from persecution at home. The number of refugees who are granted asylum is capped by the government each year. Since September 11, 2001, admittance rates have decreased dramatically.

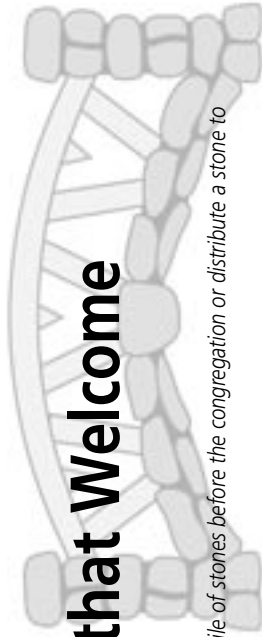
—from the National Immigration Forum

Contact MCC, (717) 859-1151, www.mcc.org or order online at www.mcc.org/catalog.

- The National Immigration Forum advocates and builds public support for policies that welcome immigrants and refugees and offers a series of short papers featuring useful statistical and historical information related to immigration. Visit www.immigrationforum.org.
7. Organize study tours to the U.S./Mexico border, refugee camps, or detention centers to learn more about U.S. immigration and refugee policies.
 - BorderLinks is a non-profit organization that conducts travel seminars focusing on the issues of Mexican border communities. Visit www.borderlinks.org.
 8. Advocate for just and humane policies for immigrants and refugees by contacting local, state, and national elected officials.
 - The MCC Washington Office offers a primer on immigration advocacy, (202) 544-6564, mccwash@mcc.org.



A litany Bridges that Welcome



Worship visual: Place a pile of stones before the congregation or distribute a stone to each participant.

Leader: What do these stones mean?

All: These stones remind us that God led the Israelites from their native land, that Jesus had no place to lay his head, and that apostles and prophets throughout history have wandered far from their homes. These stones remind some of us of our own immigrant stories.

Leader: We welcome the newcomers among us, even as our government alienates immigrants in the name of fighting terrorism. Even as migrants risk their lives to cross the desert and refugees flee their homes to seek asylum, we recognize that their homes might be safer were it not for our own nation's policies. We confess that our stones have too often built walls.

All: Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.*

Leader: We recognize the gifts of the immigrants among us: As executives, artists, and scientists whose work enriches our nation. As farm workers and day laborers whose hands harvest our food, often for unjust wages. As pastors and teachers whose spirits enliven the church. We offer our stones for the building of bridges.

All: In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.*

Leader: What do these stones mean?

All: These stones remind us that we can choose to build walls that divide or bridges that welcome. These stones remind us that today we have chosen to build bridges, to welcome the immigrants among us, and to become a lively dwelling for the Spirit of God.

*from Ephesians 2:19-22, NIV

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There's a global perspective to this. The economic system, from which we very much benefit, creates situations elsewhere where people can't live, can't survive. How about people whose whole livelihood is wiped out because some great agribusiness took over thousands and thousands of acres, a whole section of their country? They work their little cornfield... and they become virtual slaves to some banana plantation. This goes on all over the world all of the time. The floods that Hurricane Mitch produced in Central America are not solely a natural phenomenon. Part of that history is de-forestation, a kind of agriculture forced on those countries by a combination of world economic structures, politics, and the history of the warfare which really benefits the U.S. and the elite of those countries. All that stuff works together to produce a situation where people have to get out. Generally speaking, people don't leave their country,... leave everything they know, just for fun.

—John Long, VIVE, Inc., Buffalo, NY
from Third Way Café's "Beyond the News"
www.thirdway.com

Worship resources

Liturgies

- "A Liturgy in Celebration of Las Posadas", Border Working Group, www.columban.org/jpic/Resources/Compiled%20Posadas%20Pack.pdf.
- "For the Healing of the Nations: A Worship Service for World Refugee Day," General Board of Global Ministries, The United Methodist Church, <http://gbgm-umc.org/umcor/refugees/rworship.stm>
- Use the following litany as a bulletin insert with your congregation.

Hymns

from *Hymnal: A Worship Book*

- In Christ there is no East or West (306)
- For we are strangers no more (322)
- Help us to help each other (362)
- For the healing of the nations (367)
- I bind my heart this tide (411)



This resource was prepared by Bethany Spicher, MCC US Washington Office, and Susan Mark Landis, peace advocate, Mennonite Church USA. Graphics: Cynthia Friesen Coyle, PJSN volunteer.