

Community of Christ

April 2013

Statement on Immigration

Released by the First Presidency in consultation with the Human Rights Team and the World Church Leadership Council

Introduction

As we confront issues of justice and peace like immigration, Community of Christ must responsibly interpret and faithfully apply its scripture and theology in discussion and decision making. Of particular use in such efforts are our understanding of scripture and Community of Christ theology as expressed in our Enduring Principles and Mission Initiatives.

Scripture and Immigration

Because human migration has occurred throughout history, scripture's indispensable witness of God's transforming message for the world can offer counsel for the church concerning this common experience among humanity. In seeking such counsel, however, Community of Christ is reminded that scripture must never be used "to diminish or oppress races, genders, or classes of human beings" (Doctrine and Covenants 163:7c). The following scriptural and theological principles also provide essential guidance in addressing immigration issues from a Community of Christ perspective:

1. God is not the God of any particular nation, race, or ethnicity above others. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son" (John 3:16 NRSV). God created all humans, male and female, in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). Nationalism raises one race or nation above others, but God loves and values all humans equally. We therefore question any approach to immigration reform or law based on nationalism, nativism, racism, or ethnocentricity because it violates God's love for all of creation.
2. "Love the stranger" is an often-repeated commandment in the Hebrew Scriptures. "You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Deuteronomy 10:19 NRSV). The people of Israel were to be sensitive to the alien or stranger because the Egyptians oppressed, feared, and exploited them when they were immigrants in Egypt: "You shall not oppress a resident alien; you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt" (Exodus 23:9 NRSV). Most humans in their family story have been "strangers" or "aliens" at some point. The church's history includes many stories of early members being persecuted as "strangers and foreigners." We must not forget that our ancestors in faith not only experienced deportation, exile, and extermination, but received sanctuary from people outside of our faith community. Today we must love those who are "strangers and foreigners" among us.
3. "Welcome the stranger" is also a commandment in the New Testament. Paul wrote to the church in Rome saying, "Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers" (Romans 12:13 NRSV). The writer of Hebrews speaks for the stranger in this way: "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it" (Hebrews: 13:2 NRSV). Jesus himself, in a parable on the final

judgment, identified with the vulnerable including the alien: “I was a stranger and you welcomed me” (Matthew 25:35 NRSV). New Testament scripture tells us to treat the stranger like a fellow Christian, perhaps an angel in disguise, or even Jesus himself.

4. Our vision of God’s world is of a community that God loves and opens to all; one where there are no aliens or strangers, only children of God. This is the message of Jesus’ death and resurrection:

- Jesus tears down dividing walls (Ephesians 2:14).
- Pentecost overcomes language barriers (Acts 2:4–6).
- The gates are always open in New Jerusalem, God’s holy city. (Revelation 21:25).
- The house of the Lord will be called a house of prayer for all nations (Mark 11:17/Isaiah 56:7).

We envision the possibility of God’s community anywhere God’s people are. This possibility represents the church’s mission: to promote Christ-centered community.

Enduring Principles and Mission Initiatives: Responses to Immigration

Our Enduring Principles and Mission Initiatives inform our understanding of immigration.

Particularly instructive are the principles of

- Grace and Generosity, in which we compassionately share the grace God continuously and generously bestows upon us;
- Worth of All Persons, in which God views all people as having inestimable and equal worth and desires all to experience wholeness of body, mind, spirit, and relationships;
- Pursuit of Peace (Shalom), which God desires for all of creation;
- Unity in Diversity, as the church is a diverse, international family of disciples, seekers, and congregations; and
- Blessings of Community, where true community includes compassion for and solidarity with the poor, marginalized, and oppressed.

Our mission also leads us to engage the reality and challenges of immigration in our locales, specifically through the initiatives of

- Invite People to Christ, including people who are strangers in a new land;
- Abolish Poverty, End Suffering, through which immigrant families may experience support in their settlement;
- Pursue Peace on Earth, by which justice-making efforts can help stabilize communities whose residents experience pressure to leave their homeland, or can promote the reconciling of immigrants with nativist or adversarial citizens;
- Develop Disciples to Serve in diverse and culturally complex communities; and
- Experience Congregations in Mission as sanctuaries of Christ’s peace.

Understanding Immigration

Immigration issues are complex and potentially divisive. When considering the church’s response to the challenges of immigration, it is helpful to see a distinction between

- (a) People who already live permanently in a foreign country, with varied statuses of legal sanction;

- (b) Citizens, naturalized citizens, and legal residents who share cultural or racial traits with immigrants without legal sanction, and who consequently are mistaken and profiled as such;
- (c) Mixed-status families of citizens and non-citizens; and
- (d) Persons and families who want or intend to immigrate to a foreign country, perhaps because of instability or lack of opportunity in their home nation.

Immigrants who live in a foreign country need hospitality from their new neighbors and participation in community where they toil. Immigrants who want to move to a foreign country need healthy living conditions (gainful employment, social and political freedom, cultural affirmation, equal protection under the law, domestic tranquility, and the exercise of human rights) in their present setting. Successful immigration requires consistent, equitable, and humane policies that provide a just path to citizenship.

We must challenge any ideology or public policy that forbids Christians from extending hospitality to resident immigrants, or that prevents churches from serving immigrants through ministries. (Such challenges necessarily must be appropriate to the particular nation or political setting; while equal in God's sight, we sadly are not equal in the political rights afforded us.) This includes legislation that dehumanizes or denies basic human rights to any group or person. Such policies deny the worth of people by excluding them from communities where they may find a spiritual home, and receive welcome, peace, reconciliation, and healing of the spirit.

We support efforts to create and sustain community everywhere, especially where unhealthy living conditions make people so desperate that they abandon their loved ones, their culture—indeed, all that is familiar to them—to search for a better life. The answer to such circumstances is not escape to dislocation and marginalization in a foreign land, but establishment of wholesome conditions that build up human beings in their home nations.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, we encourage members and friends of Community of Christ to promote immigration policies and procedures that are humane, fair, and based on the equal worth of all people, regardless of their country of origin. We urge members and friends to engage in efforts to create genuine community for God's people everywhere.

We recommend the following actions for individuals:

1. Become better educated about current events and how they reflect faith principles and perspectives that transcend partisan political agendas.
2. Speak up for the worth of people whenever someone from a different nation or culture is stereotyped, derided, or denigrated.
3. Become more aware of immigrant issues and the misconceptions that circulate about our immigrant population. Links are at the end of this document.
4. Read about immigrant legislation and be a voice for compassion and the worth of persons. Research upcoming legislation. Where politically appropriate, contact your government officials about your concerns and views. Become familiar with your nation's laws, including conditions for granting asylum, temporary visas, residency, and

citizenship. In addition, understand laws protecting minors, victims of human trafficking, domestic violence, and other harm as a result of criminal action.

5. Learn another language and cultural customs. This will help you communicate with others and raise your awareness of how difficult it is to learn a language and what many immigrants face in learning the primary language of their new setting.
6. “Walk with” an immigrant or immigrant family in support of its integration into a new setting, learning of and leading to local resources that provide help, legal aid, or advocacy for immigrant needs and issues. Share with immigrants their legal rights and how to exercise those rights, especially of protection against forced entry and seizure (where such protections exist).
7. Consult and possibly join community, ecumenical, or interfaith organizations that already engage immigration through advocacy, empowerment, and support.
8. Be aware of immediate needs you might be able to meet if aware of an immigrant in your community who has been detained. Check to see if:
 - a. The remaining family members have access to food, transportation, translations services at school, and guardians to care for them when home from school while adults are working.
 - b. The family needs access to health care.
 - c. The person has the support of a community of faith and hope.
 - d. The person has employment and access to resources to meet bills, especially rent, if the breadwinner is detained or deported.
 - e. The person has access to social-service providers and legal aid. Sometimes citizens will mistreat, shun, or marginalize family members of a detained or suspected undocumented immigrant.

If you follow these suggestions and provide humanitarian help, you may encounter a law-enforcement initiative that you may not be equipped to confront. Be sure to alert your administrative officer and apostle beforehand of the actions you take to help others in their need.

We recommend congregations:

1. Join ecumenical and interfaith efforts addressing immigration that seek to educate about and advocate for the basic human and economic rights of all people, especially those in your community.
2. Advocate for immigrants through correspondence and dialogue in person with local governmental officials, asking them to take necessary steps to ensure the rights of all, especially those marginalized because of their ethnicity or cultural heritage.
3. Commit to fair labor practices. Decide the congregation will do business only with companies that ensure the rights of their employees and do not hire or exploit undocumented workers.

In some nations, a Community of Christ congregation also may offer sanctuary in one or more of its many expressions to people threatened with deportation. Such a step expresses “the understanding that the Temple calls the entire church to become a sanctuary of Christ’s peace (Doctrine and Covenants 163:8c).” Some churches have provided asylum to people whose immediate family members (spouse, children) are native or naturalized citizens to prevent

involuntary division of a family. Again, be sure to alert your administrative officer and apostle *before* you choose to take this step.

For interested individuals and congregations, we recommend several resources for learning more about immigration issues and opportunities for advocacy.

Resources:

- Church World Service: www.churchworldservice.org/action_what_assist_main
- International Organization for Migration: www.iom.int/jahia/jsp/index.jsp
- International Catholic Migration Commission: www.icmc.net/e/index.htm
- The United Nations Population Fund: www.unfpa.org/pds/migration.html
- World Council of Churches: www.oikoumene.org/en/programmes/unity-mission-evangelism-and-spirituality/just-and-inclusive-communities/migration-and-social-justice.html
- Human Rights First: www.humanrightsfirst.org/asylum/asylum.aspx
- Physicians for Human Rights: physiciansforhumanrights.org/asylum/
- Detention Watch Network: www.detentionwatchnetwork.org/ (US)
- Worship Materials—World Council of Churches:
www.docs.google.com/viewer?a=v&q=cache:ch78twegEIJ:www.oikoumene.org/uploads/tx_wecdiscussion/13WorshipMaterials.pdf+worship,+immigration+site:oikoumene.org&hl=en&gl=us&pid=bl&srcid=ADGEE5iwZRKKGFbdWN-CISZnc7ce9q_mPR58UMpiLJBladHXzqghyTl5kg6GcIHb8Kpr66-_1CbaeSC9qqJdoqTQKzKzRqnt5zQ_9MJMhp5vwPyNfez9dCpUIi7h155p7fn05AiiQmy&sig=AHIEtbRWe-VJf8GfQwVCv7TGrlKR4UqS_Q&pli=1
- Community of Christ: www.CofChrist.org/immigration/action.asp

Christian-education resource (for English-speaking settings):

Strangers in the Land— published by Sojourners; six-session study resource, suitable for adult class (note: resource promotes a particular perspective)