



To Love the Sojourner

United Methodist Council of Bishops' Statement on Undocumented Migration

Refugees and Immigration

A Resource for Churches

A Statement of Concern to United Methodists in the United States of America from the United Methodist Council of Bishops

Love the sojourner...for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt.

-Deuteronomy 10:19

We the bishops of The United Methodist Church, moved by our concern for the plight of undocumented immigrants sojourning in the United States, urgently invite you to share with us in the effort to love the sojourner.

Anxious parents, hungry and frightened children, tortured and abused peasants, students, workers looking for opportunity, all have left the land of their birth in the hope that they might satisfy the desire for life that moves all human beings. Many immigrants come to us voluntarily as a result of the difficult decision to leave home in quest of better circumstances; others, like the Haitian and Central American refugees, who are forced out of their homeland by persecution and the terrible dislocation of armed conflict, come involuntarily. These people arrive among us not only with their need, but also bearing gifts of energy, resourcefulness, and fundamental hope that may contribute to the renewal of the society and the church. Above all, these strangers bear to us the Christ. These are they of whom Jesus spoke when he said, "I was a stranger (sojourner) and you welcomed me" (Mathew 25:35).

God comes in the form of the sojourner, the vulnerable person who lacks the benefit of status and protection in an alien land. In the flesh of Jesus of Nazareth God chose to sojourn on this earth to save all humankind. In Jesus the sojourning God broke the power of sin, death, and injustice, and restored the possibility of authentic community in which love and justice reign and peace prevails.

The sojourning God cares especially for sojourning peoples and invites all who would know the fullness of life to share in caring for such people. We in the Christian community experience that invitation in very particular ways. Our ancestors in the faith from the time of Abraham and Sarah have been sojourners. Indeed, the faithfulness of Abraham and Sarah in abandoning their home in response to God's call

We reaffirm our conviction that:

and in trust of a seemingly impossible promise is presented by the Apostle Paul as the model of authentic Christian faith (Romans 4:18-25). Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Miriam, Joshua, Deborah, Ruth, Mary, Paul, to name but a few, are our sojourning ancestors in the faith. By God's grace the Christian church is made part of this great pilgrimage toward fulfillment. It is rightly called the pilgrim people of God.

As God's pilgrim people the church inherits the unique vocation of being that community through whom the peoples of the earth shall be blessed. The church models in its own life God's intention for all humankind.

The church of Jesus Christ, in the power and unity of the Holy Spirit, is called to serve as an alternative community to an alienated and fractured world, a loving and peaceable international company of disciples transcending all governments, races and ideologies; reaching out to all "enemies"; and ministering to all the victims of poverty and oppression (*In Defense of Creation: Foundation Document*, 19, 9.37).

As a world church that lives in the United States of America as well as other countries, we acknowledge our common journey with the United States in the effort to form a just society.

In the spirit of the covenant that binds us all as Christians and under the divine mandate received through the history of that covenant in the Scriptures and enacted in our own tradition and practice, we seek to address the injustice and hardship inflicted upon sojourners and, indeed, upon United States citizens, by the United States Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986. It appears that (this act) offers hope for some persons and renders life much more difficult for the vast majority of immigrant peoples in the United States. These circumstances cry out for attention from the church and from Christian individuals.

The legalization program that helped legitimize the Act obscured the repressiveness of the law. While a minority of undocumented persons are enabled to regularize their status in the United States, most immigrants will never experience legalization. Even those who have been fortunate enough to get through the unnecessarily difficult first step of the program still face another round of arbitrary requirements and confusing procedures.

Benefit for the few has been achieved at the expense of the many who are pressed even deeper into the twilight existence of the undocumented person who is so easily exploited, used when convenient and expedient, but then cast aside as an obsolete tool or a spent resource. Every provision of the Act including the one for legalization dehumanizes the sojourner. When the sojourner is welcomed, it is because of economic or political expediency. As the Special Agricultural Workers and the H-2A provisions make abundantly clear, sojourners are welcome to the extent that they may be productive instruments in an economic enterprise that

robs work of its capacity to humanize and to express the creativity of human spirit.

Our concern for the family, for the well-being of children, the equality of women and men, go for naught before this Act. We rejoice with those for whom the law does bring relief and the opportunity for citizenship and pledge them our full support in the pursuit of that goal. But the inadequacies of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 call for an entirely new look at our immigration policies.

Acknowledging our particular role among the pilgrim people of God, we invite all those who share our beliefs to express their uncompromising intention to welcome the sojourners in our midst with open arms and to walk with them towards our mutual fulfillment as human beings. We pledge ourselves to know them, their circumstances and needs; to love them, to embrace them and their struggle; to bid them welcome to our communities, religious and civil, for as long as is necessary, or for as long as they should decide to remain. We commit ourselves to walk humbly with God toward that realm where justice is done because tender love dwells in the hearts of women and men.

As servants of God, and in the company of the prophets of Israel, we dare to challenge our own values, institutions and practices as a sign and means of transformation of the total sociopolitical and economic environment, so as to create a world community in which none is in want because all share the earth's resources for the common good.

Genuine hospitality for the sojourner requires not only a welcoming embrace, but also the effort to address the conditions that uprooted them from native soil. God's pilgrim people in the United States are called to recognize and repent their participation in systems that result in injustice and contribute to the circumstances that lead people to undertake the risk of sojourning. Fully to love the sojourners, acting justly on their behalf, challenges the ultimate commitments and fundamental values of the sociopolitical and economic systems of which we are all a part. The church cannot easily extricate itself from those unjust systems and wash its hands of the problems. The United Methodist Church can act justly within the systems by challenging them through the management of its considerable resources, and through advocacy of foreign and domestic policies that value human welfare above a narrow concept of national security. In concert with other Christian communities, transformation of these systems can begin. The pilgrimage to human fulfillment for some cannot be fueled at the expense of any human being. If anyone is diminished as a person of dignity and worth, all persons are diminished.

Genuine hospitality ultimately receives the most precious gift the sojourner brings to the host: fulfillment in actualizing the capacity to love as God loves. In their quest for abundant life, the sojourners bring to those who will receive it no other gift than the Christ.

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