

In our call to show hospitality to strangers, we as Christians can help immigrants make the difficult transition to a new life.

LINDA K. PARKYN

How Do We Welcome the Newcomer?

In the early 1990s Rigoberto Garcia Hernandez immigrated to the United States from El Salvador. He came seeking political asylum. When I met him I was carrying a flimsy paper sign that said “Bienvenido Rigoberto.” He was disembarking from a plane to be resettled in my community. He came to me a stranger because he was in great need. I was part of a small group in my church that had decided we wanted to help immigrants in our town.

Doing that was a challenge! We learned how difficult it is to deal with agencies involved in health care, housing, and job training. We struggled through cultural adjustment; we made mistakes.

In spite of our feeble steps, the gospel of Jesus was proclaimed to Rigo by the actions of this faithful group. Through us, Rigo experienced the love of Jesus, not because we spoke it to him, nor because we understood very well the challenges he faced. He experienced the love of

Jesus because we chose to love him and care for him.

When he first arrived in our community, Rigo was undocumented. He worked in a pizza place for under-the-table wages, he got caught up in a school loan scheme, he lived day-to-day and relied on good luck and hard work for food and shelter. Slowly, tentatively, Rigo became one of us.

Immigration is the story of people on the move. Uprooted from family and home, culture and security, they face an uncertain future. Most people do not become immigrants by choice alone. Usually they are compelled to move by forces beyond their control. Often immigration is a forced flight from poverty, repression, or war. Some immigrants set off alone, making the journey without knowing where they are going. Most do not delude themselves that their new life will be easy. They make the journey to “the promised land” in hopes that their children will have a better life.

Today Rigo is a certified electrician. He owns a house, is married with

three children, has become a U.S. citizen, and speaks English reasonably well. He has made a life for himself. He could not have done this without help.

People like Rigo are everywhere in our lives. In each apple or tomato that we bite into, in every landscaping job we admire, in every piece of clothing on our backs, the lives of individual workers call out to us. If we clothe them, feed them, teach them English, visit them, and love them, we provide a way to put food on their tables, shoes on their children’s feet, and clothes on the backs of their loved ones back home.

Loving God and loving our neighbors applies in affluent America as much as it applies in the garbage heaps of Mother Teresa’s Kolkata, in the tunnels where the street kids live in Mexico City, in the slums of Nairobi, or in the war-torn neighborhoods of Baghdad. We understand this truth, but too often we fail to live it.

Often it is hardest to see those who are closest to us. It is easy to look



past our immediate neighbors—the people Jesus calls us to love—because many of them live in the shadows. These newcomers blend into the background. They take service jobs, they take orders, they clean up, they don't interact much, and they keep a low profile because they are simply grateful for the chance to feed, clothe, and educate their families. Sometimes it's easier to see those who are needy on the other side of the world than it is to recognize them next door. Up-close-and-in-your-face missions is not for the weak-hearted, but when we come to know our neighbors, we come face to face with the difference between the haves and the have-nots in our society.

Gracious Christianity means welcoming the newcomer. Hospitality is both personal and communal. *I* must welcome the stranger; *we* must welcome the stranger. As we do, we will grow and our church, our neighborhood, and our larger community will be blessed. Hebrews 13:2 gives us the best reason for doing so:

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“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it” (NAS).

Learning from Newcomers

For each of the past twenty years students in my university classes have tutored and helped new immigrants in our respective communities. We helped groups of Southeast Asians in the 1980s; Bosnians, Russian Jews, and Nigerians in the 1990s; Serbians, Croatians, Indonesians, and Indians in 2000; and more recently Sudanese, Liberians, and Uzbeks, along with Latin Americans, our closest neighbors.

Through our interaction with the strangers among us we have discov-

ered meaning for our own lives, and we have reflected on what it means to be gracious Christians because we have been involved in the lives of others. In newcomers, students discover exemplars—lives and communities that are worth attention because they have something to say to us about our world and our place in it. Through the writing of personal journals, students reflect on their experiences, noting how they affect their understanding of the world. Here are some of their words:

“Their homes smell different than mine. It's a difference I've come to look forward to.”

“I'll never forget—theirs is a scary past spoken about only in whispers.”

“Before this, I suppose I knew there were refugees, but they were faceless. Now they have faces.”

“I've never questioned that there are other ways of doing things, but I always thought my way was the best

Linda K. Parkyn is professor of Spanish at North Park University and a member of North Park Covenant Church in Chicago.

way. Maybe my way isn't the best sometimes. Or at least not the best for everybody."

"I used to take English for granted. What a mistake!"

"My definition of need is terribly inflated."

"I am constantly asking myself: Where is the line between helpfulness and paternalism?"

"Tutoring my immigrant family didn't simply change me. It broke me and rebuilt me."

"So a Muslim can be just like me... who knew? They eat, sleep, love their families, and they wish to interpret their world by their holy book. Maybe I need to read that Koran."

What Churches Can Do

If these are the responses of individuals who have taken time to come to know our new neighbors, what might a gracious welcome look like in our churches? It will vary in each context; nevertheless, there are some commonalities. For starters, it is important to realize that the language we use does matter. Calling our friends "aliens" and "illegals" puts young men and women like Rigo at greater risk. As we care for, help, and love those who now live among us, they become, rather, "newcomers," "immigrants," and "undocumented workers."

Likewise, referring to newcomers as "the least of these" can be demeaning. Most of those in need know far more about suffering, grief, and loneliness than we understand, and yet they courageously continue on. Newcomers are strong, not weak. They have exhibited courage and resourcefulness. Remember Matthew 25, and give a cup of cold water, a cloak, and anything else as needed, but realize that

newcomers bring the graciousness of God as their companion. They may be strangers to us, but in welcoming them we may be welcoming an angel.

Inviting a second congregation made up of newcomers into our church can be a good place to begin. But having two congregations meeting in a common facility at different times and in different languages does not mean our work of hospitality is complete. Separate services may be preferable so that people can worship in their own language and find a sense of belonging with others from their homeland. Yet it is also important to have times when the two congregations work and worship together.

Invite the new congregation to be an equal partner with your church. Go to their service; invite them to yours. We may not understand everything that is going on in worship, but often that can be freeing! New ideas can enliven a congregation. Ask them how you can best care for each other, and promote bonds between the two groups. Do we really need two separate youth groups, two separate women's groups? Can the congregations do a service project together? Seek for ways to invite them to be part of, not parallel to, the group that occupied the building first.

Families of newcomers can partner with families in the established church to care for each other. A grandmother in the church could read to the young children of a new immigrant family. An immigrant landscaper might choose to do the yard work for an elderly couple as his ministry. Eat potluck meals together—it's a strong and creative menu that combines peanut butter sandwiches and fried rice! Pair

up families by ages of children so that friendships can be formed among the next generation. When we realize that we all have gifts to share, we can look for ways that each family pairing can satisfy a need of the other. We love each other best when there is a two-way responsibility.

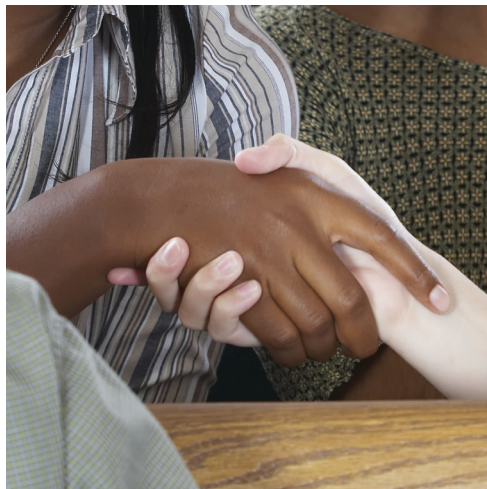
Get out of your comfort zone and share your language with a newcomer. You know a lot more about this than you think you do. Language learning happens best by hearing English spoken in natural ways. It isn't limited to grammar books and fill-in-the-blank sentences. What newcomers need is to hear people speaking about everyday things and someone to help them ask and answer questions. We don't lean into a crib and tell a baby, "You can't use the past tense yet. You haven't learned that." Gesture, smile, laugh—these nonverbal communications are at least half of language learning. Be human with one another!

Read to children of immigrants, let them hear English, and in six months you will have an English speaker and a friend for life. You can help adults by filling out forms and accompanying them to the doctor and to job interviews. Be a go-between in their new lives. It is never easy, but neither is it ever dull.

Sharing each other's culture can bring your own culture to life. Teach newcomers about holidays in your country. It can be helpful to make up word cards for each celebration and explain the holiday decorations and the reasons behind the celebration. Cook your favorite family meal and invite them to sample. In turn, ask about their holidays. Celebrate one with them. You can also take the time to explain school closings, work

holidays, and summer vacations—each of these may be a new concept. As a new friend, you can help the newcomer know what to expect.

Who can you identify in your church to teach computer skills (as well as English) to both adults and children? Basic computer skills are often essential to getting a job, so consider donating computers and



Fences, walls, and rivers—be they geographical or theological—have no place in God’s abiding love. As Americans sometimes we are slow to learn that everything we do is interconnected and that we need newcomers as much as they need us. We can be welcoming Christians, taking the gospel seriously and loving our new neighbors, or we

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printers and setting up a place in the church for newcomers to practice. In some countries computer cafes are prevalent, and people pay for computer use by the hour. Many immigrants already have skills that they acquired in their own countries, and they just need a place to practice and prepare for jobs here.

Encourage your church board of compassion, mercy, and justice to work for immigration reform. As Christians we are called to seek to alleviate injustice. Simply ignoring the challenge doesn’t help. Eleven million undocumented workers are not simply going to go back home because we say they must.

Two years ago Senators John McCain and Ted Kennedy collaborated to write a bipartisan bill to address immigration reform with help toward citizenship and consequences for having migrated without proper papers. But the Senate closed up shop for the year and let the bill die in committee. We must work in our communities for equitable answers that respect the dignity of all people. We can be advocates. We can find representation, understand the

considerable cost involved, and ask questions on behalf of the newcomer. We can review the citizenship test and tutor new friends to help them pass the test (bookstores carry guides to the citizenship exam, such as *Barron’s U.S. Citizenship Test*, or *U.S. Citizenship for Dummies*).

As followers of Jesus, we acknowledge that we are all sojourners here. The Covenant is an immigrant church and our future depends upon new Christians finding us relevant and interesting and becoming a part of us.

The Mexicans, Pakistanis, Indians, and Congolese new to our neighborhoods today will become the “new Americans” in a few short years. We need them as much as they need us. As we sojourn together, we must open our hearts to learn from each other. In our culture, many of us live at significant geographical distance from our family and loved ones. What better way to share everyday love than to find people nearby who really need us—and whom we really need as well.

Covenant congregations in any and every community can become centers of creative and courageous thinking in living out a gracious Christianity.

can become irrelevant as newcomers among us become the new faces of this great immigrant land.

This kind of up-close missions is not for the comfortable, however. It’s not for those who want everything to remain the same. It is for those who see an expansive church, an inclusive church, a church that goes out the front door and beckons others to come in, to be welcomed, to be a part of the mission. It’s gritty, it’s messy, and it requires getting our hands dirty.

A small immigrant community started the Evangelical Covenant Church in North America. In the succeeding decades that community thrived in their new land, and their congregations outgrew themselves in every community they moved into. Some days I imagine that Covenant Christians from past generations—those who worshiped in Swedish because they had yet to learn English—smile on us today as we strive, in 2009, to be gracious and welcoming Christians who reach beyond ourselves and, in an out-of-this-world kind of way, extravagantly welcome, love, and learn from other newcomers who sojourn among us. ■