



This year the Covenant Church takes time to explore
a complex and polarizing issue. | LIZ VERHAGE

A Call to Talk about **IMMIGRATION**

John Tanagho, a lawyer and member of Sojourner Covenant Church in Evanston, Illinois, left Egypt with his family when he was just a year old. They didn't want to leave their home, but John's father had been imprisoned for his Christian faith and they felt that they had no other options. His mother and father were both physicians, yet they left behind their profession, their church, family, and friends, and they came to the United States to find a new life.

Steven Larson, pastor of Redeemer Covenant Church in Brooklyn Park, Minnesota, reports that 123 people in his congregation of more than 300 are either foreign born or have a foreign born family member. The church's ministry team routinely works through issues of immigration with families, though he admits that it often feels like an uphill struggle. "Even though we have celebrated with many who have received their full citizenship, we have several who are currently caught in a bureaucratic nightmare. This is an important place that the church becomes a powerful advocate on behalf of our sisters and brothers," he says.

Recent North Park Theological Seminary graduate Evelmyn Ivens was born in Mexico and grew up in California where she attended a first-generation Hispanic congregation. She says that many people close to her experienced being undocumented for a season and wrestled with feeling invisible and not knowing where to turn. They lived in constant fear of being separated from their families.

These three stories only begin to scratch the surface of the complexities of immigration issues and their effect on individuals, families, and communities throughout the country.

As a pastor, parent, and chair of the Covenant's Christian Action Commission, I am learning about the people, the facts, and the Scriptures that are part of the ongoing discussion of immigration reform in the United States. These issues affect millions of people, many of whom are brothers and sisters in Christ who are already within or connected to our churches.

I am learning about economic drivers that compel people to cross borders in order to feed their children. I'm learning about religious and ethnic factors that are often hidden from the headlines. I have heard stories of children on Chicago's north side who came home from school to find their parents gone. They had been whisked away by officials, and the children were left alone without help or support or even a way to contact their parents.

I have learned that the idea that people should just get in line and come to the United States legally is a false concept. Those so-called lines don't exist for many suffering, struggling, hungry, and persecuted people outside of the United States. If there were actually such a line, many immigrants would in fact gladly queue up, pay their fees, and do the paperwork, or work within the system for a reasonable hope of being able to come. But the current immigration system is so outdated that a huge swath of leaders in the United States—from CEOs of agribusiness to faith leaders, from the president of the Southern Baptist denomination to John Perkins, founder of the Christian Community Development Association—agree that we need to reform our laws.

Many folks agree that current immigration policy is creating a host of economic, emotional, and physical costs—but most of us do not know how to talk about this topic without feeling anxious about how controversial, emotional, and sometimes divisive such conversations can become. At our best, we in the church provide a unique place to listen well, learn alongside each other, and even change the conversation. When we study Scripture, soften our hearts to listen to each other, and humbly and honestly work toward being a witness on controversial



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issues, we serve not only the church but the world at large.

The Covenant Church has an opportunity to learn, listen, and act faithfully together, and the resolution on immigration is one tool aimed at helping the church do that well.

The commission introduced a draft resolution on immigration this past June at the Covenant Annual Meeting. The title “Toward a Resolution on Immigration—A Covenant Conversation” is meant to reflect the commission’s intent to open up dialogue and provide a place to talk, learn, and better understand this complex and sometimes emotionally charged issue. The world around us is talking about this topic—and we who are followers of Christ have to work hard, and be intentional, if we hope to have a conversation that starts differently and is shaped by different questions from those outside the church. Many faithful leaders and denominations from across the spectrum—from both stereotypically conservative and liberal groups, both evangelicals and main-line—are in agreement that our faith compels us to be involved in the topic of immigration and to engage it differently from the way the world does.

In the Covenant we begin with Scripture, so in addressing any ethical question we first ask, “Where is it written?” The first section of the resolution lays a biblical foundation for thinking about immigration. We look at texts that remind us to extend compassion and justice to

the foreigner or strangers among us, remembering how the Jews were foreigners in Egypt (Deuteronomy 10:18) and that welcoming the stranger is like welcoming Jesus (Matthew 25:35).

The resolution then moves to a section that addresses the current context of immigration in the United States by examining the goals of obeying the law and protecting national security while also recognizing that the current system for legal immigration and preserving family unity is very difficult. The resolution then issues a call to the church “to be salt and light to the national discourse on immigration by asking distinctly different questions than those within the divisive secular debates.” We must listen to our brothers and sisters who are being affected by this issue. The conversation is different when we move from statistics to faces and names.

Our witness both within the church and in the world depends on our listening to Scripture and to our neighbors so that we can learn together, pray together, extend compassion and hospitality to others, and, finally, advocate and act on behalf of some of the most marginalized and unheard voices in our society today. This conversation will take work, but this work has the potential to bear much fruit and to be a place where the church can uniquely impact the conversation around immigration going on in the world for the good of our neighbor and for the glory of God. ■

Toward a Resolution on Immigration— A Covenant Conversation

Introduction

In remembrance of our denomination’s history, at the 125th anniversary celebration of the Evangelical Covenant Church in 2010 we affirmed that we began as an immigrant church and celebrated that today we continue to be an immigrant church. The early immigrants of the Covenant Church faced profound challenges as they entered as strangers and foreigners into a new land. These Covenant ancestors were strengthened in their journey through faith in Jesus Christ who was no stranger to the experiences of immigrants.

We want to consider how both our history as an immigrant church in an immigrant nation and our biblically rooted faith in Jesus Christ may prophetically speak to our present context. How does our history and our common faith inform how we understand the difficult and complex issues surrounding immigration? Far too often we in the church have failed to engage the immigration conversation distinctly as Christians. It can be easy to let political influences, fear, and stereotypes guide the discourse, which keeps us from thoughtful, informed dialogue.

This resolution is about changing the conversation about immigration, both within our churches and within our communities. It is about helping us address issues of immigration from a Christian perspective as biblically informed people. As the Covenant Resource Paper on Compassion, Mercy, and Justice reminds us, the church must pursue God's justice by asking, "How do we make things right in our broken world?"

Biblical Foundation

The Bible tells us that all people, regardless of national origin or citizenship status, are made in the image of God and must be treated with dignity and respect (Genesis 1:26-27).

In the Old Testament, God's relationship with humanity centers on a covenant with an immigrant, Abraham, and his descendants, the people of Israel, whose forced migration to Egypt led to their enslavement. When God liberated them they set out as immigrants in hope toward a land "flowing with milk and honey" (Exodus 3:7-10).

After Israel settled into the land of Canaan, God commanded that, "the foreigners residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt" (Leviticus 19:34-35). This command reflects God's character as the one who "loves the foreigner among you, giving them food and clothing" (Deuteronomy 10:18). God's concern and care for the stranger and foreigner runs throughout the Law and the Prophets, guiding the people when they were settled in their homeland and when they were in exile, a minority population working to remain faithful in a strange land (Exodus 23:9; Deuteronomy 24:21; 26:12; Leviticus 19:18; Numbers 15:14; Psalm 146:9; Jeremiah 7:6; Ezekiel 22:7; Zechariah 7:10; Malachi 3:5).

The book of Ruth shows these commands in action, telling the story of Ruth the Moabite, a widow who left her homeland, culture, and religion for the unknown land, people, and God of her Israelite mother-in-law, Naomi. Displaced, grieving, and vulnerable, Ruth survived on the kindness of her adopted people, eventually remarried, and became a full member of the community.

Jesus, a descendant of Ruth (Matthew 1:5), began his life as a sojourner, journeying in the womb to Bethlehem by political decree, and then fleeing to Egypt with his parents after his birth to escape political violence (Luke 2:1-7; Matthew 2:13). His ministry was marked by care for the poor and marginalized, often crossing borders, stretching boundaries, and challenging unjust laws in the process (John 4; Luke 15:21-28; Matthew 12:1-14). Jesus also took the Old Testament commands a step further, saying, "I was a stranger and you invited me in" (Matthew 25:35). His death reconciled humanity with God and created a new family that included non-Israelites who had been "separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise" (Ephesians 2:12).

As the church spread throughout the Roman Empire, it showed hospitality to strangers (Hebrews 13:2) and shared the good news of Jesus with people of all nationalities and social classes. Early Christians wrestled with the challenges of being citizens of heaven and citizens of local cities, regions, and nations. On the one hand they were encouraged to "be subject to the governing authorities... who hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong" (Romans 13:1-7; cf. 1 Peter 2:13-17). On the other hand they knew the teaching of the prophets that legal structures are sometimes a source of

A Look at the Resolution Process

The Christian Action Commission proposes resolutions for the church to discuss, learn from, and vote on at Annual Meetings. Each year the commission meets and consults with advisers from the Department of Compassion, Mercy, and Justice, North Park Theological Seminary, Covenant Ministries of Benevolence, and other partners to create thoughtful and practical statements on matters of ethical discipleship. Once resolutions are passed they are not binding documents, rather they are offered as a resource and guide for the church. Resolutions are intended to encourage and spur each of us toward discipleship, and to provide a biblical foundation for our thinking and praxis as a body of believers.

The commission takes two to three years to develop and present resolutions. Those addressing complex issues are first presented to the Annual Meeting in draft format for the church to review. The following year they are brought to the Annual Meeting in final form for a vote. This yearlong review process is intended to help the church create time and space to engage in dialogue around the topic, resulting in greater awareness, reflection, and action. A key part of this longer process is to encourage the entire denomination to offer input on the draft resolution—whether online or in various meetings. Those insights, edits, comments, and suggestions make the draft a stronger and more helpful resource.

The commission invites online feedback on the resolution on immigration through October at CovChurch.org. Further resources are available there as well. We are grateful for the participation of the church in creating this tool to love mercy and do justice. ■

injustice (Amos 5:12-15; Micah 7:2-3) and that God calls his people to speak up for reform (Isaiah 10:1-4; Jeremiah 7:1-7). Their experience also showed that there were times when civil disobedience was required for the sake of the gospel, times when “we must obey God rather than human beings” (Acts 5:29). Ultimately, they looked forward to the New Jerusalem, a city in which “the nations will walk by its light...and on no day will its gates be shut” (Revelations 21:24-25).



Immigration Reality

The United States has a conflicted history in regard to welcoming the stranger and foreigner. Many have been welcomed and given opportunity. “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,” is a part of the famous poem on a plaque within the Statue of Liberty seen by generations of immigrants and refugees coming to America through Ellis Island. Yet not everyone has been welcomed, and issues of full citizenship have restricted the rights of many. U.S. history includes the displacement and elimination of Native Americans and the forced migration and enslavement of generations of Africans. Asian immigrants were prevented from becoming citizens

with the passage of the Naturalization Act of 1870, which was followed by the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 that banned immigration from China. The United States has also had a history of recurrent and often virulent opposition to immigration especially in times of economic challenge, when immigration has been perceived more as a threat than as an opportunity.

U.S. immigration laws have been complex and have frequently changed. When the people who first formed the Evangelical Covenant Church came to the United States from Sweden, federal immigration law as we know it did not exist. Many who arrived were able to make their life in the United States without a visa. The Chinese Exclusion Act was the first significant prohibition of immigration. Over the next four decades, the United States passed laws preventing entry of the

sick and illiterate. In 1921 and 1924 Congress passed quotas that made it extremely difficult to immigrate, particularly for those outside of northern and western European countries that were granted the vast majority of the limited number of visas. In 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson overhauled the policy, making immigration possible based on family connections and employability. Subsequently U.S. laws have become a confusing patchwork limiting both the needs of potential immigrants and the needs of the nation, while leaving millions in a legal limbo.

Today these immigration laws are in desperate need of reform. Many evangelicals are concerned that current policies are superseding our biblical call. According to the Evangelical Immigration Table: “Our national immigration laws have created a moral, economic, and political crisis in America. Initiatives to remedy this crisis have led to polarization and name calling in which opponents have misrepresented each other’s positions as open borders and amnesty versus deportations of millions. This false choice has led to an unacceptable political stalemate at the federal level at a tragic human cost.”

Speaking to the Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration, Leith Anderson, president of the National Association of Evangelicals noted, “The current backlog in family reunification petitions, with waiting periods stretching into years and even decades, is shortsighted and immoral. It causes much suffering and tempts desperate people to work around our laws where our system offers no realistic possibilities for timely family reunion.”

The Call

Christians are called to be salt and light to the national discourse on immigration by asking distinctly different questions than those within the divisive secular debates. Our dialogue on immigration should reflect that we are talking about human beings and families loved by God and for whom Christ died. This may lead to asking different questions, such as: How can we address these issues from a foundation of biblical hope rather than operating out of a context of fear and hostility? How can we welcome and care for immigrants regardless of legal status as people made in the image of God? How can we support intelligent and compassionate enforce-

ment of immigration laws and secure borders that respect human dignity? How can we advocate for U.S. immigration and economic policies to take into account the stifling poverty and rampant violence in the Middle East, Latin America, Africa, and beyond, that lead to migration? How can we advocate for immigration laws that keep immigrant families together? How can we advocate for labor laws that protect undocumented immigrants from exploitative labor conditions and human trafficking?

Asking these questions and expressing concern for those searching for a safer home and better life for their families does not betray our respect for the rule of law or legitimate concerns about a secure border. We affirm that immigrants are also called biblically to “seek the welfare” of their new-found home (Jeremiah 29:4-7) as they seek jobs, pay taxes, and contribute to their communities.

The church is invited to identify with and show compassion to the immigrant, the stranger, and the foreigner both within and outside the faith community. At its core, the immigration debate is about real people, many of whom are members of our Covenant family—mothers, fathers, children, grandmothers, and grandfathers, each with their own walk of faith and story to share.

The Response

The church should challenge the dehumanization of any immigrant—documented or undocumented—whether in the media, in our churches, or around the water cooler. This includes examining how we speak of the issue, and the words we use to describe undocumented immigrants. As Nobel Peace laureate Elie Wiesel says, “No human being is illegal.” Calling people such is hurtful and offensive, and is a barrier to meaningful conversation. As followers of the Christ who was himself a “stranger with no place to lay his head,” we are invited to advocate for the vulnerable and marginalized among us as an act of discipleship.

Our hope is that Christians would lead the nation in changing the tenor and focus of the immigration conversation by reflecting Christ’s radical spirit of compassion and hospitality. We are reminded by the Covenant’s 2004 Resolution on Kingdom Values and Global Citizenship, that “being the by-product of immigrant movements we have, when at our best, extended compassion to the sojourner and the stranger.”

Therefore, be it resolved that the 128th Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Covenant Church calls Covenant churches and Covenanters to:

1) Extend Christ’s generous hospitality, welcome, and compassion to immigrants, regardless of their legal status, treating them with dignity and respect as persons created in the image of God.

2) Equip ourselves for healthy, Christian dialogue together in pursuit of educating ourselves and our congregations about the immigration issue. Engage in communal Bible study and other resources, to ground our response in a biblical perspective.

3) Pray and advocate for our sisters and brothers who are caught in and suffer from the complexities of our current immigration system.

4) Allow our worship and our biblical story to shape us as we pray for courage to stand in solidarity with our immigrant neighbors in this present hour.

5) Enter into meaningful relationships with immigrant neighbors and immigrant churches creating a safe space to share and hear stories.

6) Advocate for fair and humane immigration laws and policies that:

- create a path toward legal immigration status or citizenship for qualifying undocumented immigrants upon satisfaction of specific criteria;
- establish law enforcement initiatives that are consistent with humanitarian values and protect the unity of the immediate family;
- reform the family-based immigration system to reduce waiting times for separated families to be reunited;
- advocate for the end of profiling actions that diminish personhood and create a culture of fear for the immigrant;
- foster respect for the rule of law and promote secure national borders; and
- expand legal avenues for workers to enter the United States and work in a safe and legal manner with their rights and due process fully protected.

7) Support international development organizations, such as Covenant World Relief, Bread for the World, and others that address root causes of migration from a biblical perspective, including the economic disparities between sending and receiving nations. ■

To join the conversation
online, go to:
CovChurch.org/resolutions/2013-immigration