

A Revised Statement on the Immigration System in the United States¹

As people of faith, and citizens of the United States, it is essential that American Baptist Churches of Metropolitan New York stand with other religious communions as well as civic organizations calling for revised social policies that raise our collective consciousness regarding unjust immigration laws and practices in our nation.

Toward this end, the members of the Public Mission Committee have identified practices that governmental and law enforcement agencies use against immigrants, particularly those who are undocumented. This is a serious social justice concern and a moral imperative. Through much research, the committee has identified the following:

THE SITUATION

The current United States immigration system is faltering, particularly in reference to the treatment of undocumented persons. As a nation, the US has not found a way to balance its security and humanitarian concerns. As a result, many families now in this country, or seeking to be in this country are being torn apart, and many people are experiencing great and needless suffering because of it.

There are currently approximately 11 million undocumented immigrants in the United States² including over 3 million persons in New York City alone.³ Many persons come fleeing violence and/or poverty in their respective countries of origin, and come here hoping to find a better life. Immigrants work in virtually all industries, on all levels of the economy, and contribute almost one quarter of our state's GDP,⁴ as well as an immeasurable amount of cultural richness and diversity. These immigrants are our neighbors and a vital part of our communities. We need them, yet we believe they are not being treated in fair or humane ways.

The 2012 executive order named the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) enables children of undocumented immigrants who were brought here as babies or as young children, and have been thoroughly vetted, to remain in the US and be able to go to college or work via a two-year renewable period of deferred action of deportation. Over 800,000 young people, known as "Dreamers" (named after the "Dream Act" of 2001) consider the United States as their national home. Dreamers and their families contribute to the nation, its economy and function as citizens of the United States. However, Dreamers and their families live with the

¹ A Statement on Immigration was approved by the ABCMNY Board on March 28, 2006. This statement is a revision of the 2006 statement

² <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2016/09/20/illegal-immigration-united-states-mexico-asia-> (as accessed 3/6/18) (as accessed 3/6/18)

³ http://www.fiscalpolicy.org/publications2007/FPI_ImmReport_WorkingforaBetterLife.pdf (as accessed 3/6/18)

⁴ http://www.fiscalpolicy.org/publications2007/FPI_ImmReport_WorkingforaBetterLife.pdf (as accessed 3/6/18)

insecurity that the DACA program will unceremoniously come to an end. If this happens, young people will be deported to their countries of origin where they have no homes, few family members and friends, and in some cases, do not even speak the languages of their countries of origin.

People who flee to the United States, including children, to seek asylum from life threatening situations are subjected to extraordinarily long waits, sometimes years, in prisonlike conditions. During this time, they must navigate through a difficult and complex process involving multiple government agencies. Meanwhile, family members seeking to join their immigrated family members, are left suspended and unable to plan for their own futures.⁵

Additionally, while overall deportation numbers have somewhat decreased, deportations of non-criminals by the Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agency (ICE) has nearly tripled during the past fiscal year.⁶ Many people currently being deported have been in the USA for decades: they have raised families, established businesses, and contributed to their communities. Needlessly tearing them away from their families adds to human misery and accomplishes little in terms of national security.

Finally, despite the fact that undocumented immigration from or through Mexico has actually declined, a costly (20 billion dollars) and ineffective border wall is currently in a planning phase. Instead of working toward sensible and humane immigration policies that might strengthen our communities, tax dollars will be used to literally wall us off from our border neighbors.

THE ISSUES

1. NATIONAL SECURITY

While respect for the law is certainly important, it is important for laws to be fair. Enforcement only works when laws are realistic and enforceable. This is best achieved by a comprehensive overhaul that combines immigration reform, which includes a path to permanent status or citizenship for immigrants now located here, as well as the creation of wider legal channels with effective enforcement for those to enter the US in the future.

2. CITIZENSHIP

Undocumented immigrants live their lives in the shadows, unable to access what many citizens take for granted, i.e., obtaining driver's licenses, bank accounts, student loans, social security benefits, and legal protections. This shadow existence is harmful to these immigrants and the communities in which they reside. Therefore, there must be reasonable pathways to citizenship for undocumented immigrants who currently living in the United States.

⁵ <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/asylum-united-states> (as accessed on 3/6/18)

⁶ https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/trump-immigrant-deportation-noncriminals_us_5a25dfc8e4b07324e8401714 (as accessed on 3/5/18)

3. FAMILIES

One of the major problems with our current immigration laws and policies is the way they often destroy families. Restrictive laws and bureaucratic delays often make it hard for families to be together. In addition, the way deportations are carried out often tears families apart. This trauma is not healthy for our immigrant neighbors nor for our communities as a whole.

4. EMPLOYMENT AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE CONCERN

Much of our economy, particularly here in New York State, depends on the labor of undocumented workers, many of which are exploited due to their status. There needs to be wider legal channels, so needed workers might be admitted legally to fill available jobs. The US needs a worker visa program that adequately protects the wages and working conditions of U.S. immigrant workers. It should also allow workers to change jobs, meaningfully enforce both the visa program's rules and existing labor laws, to protect law-abiding employers from unscrupulous competitors, and to provide a path to permanent citizenship.

5. RACIAL JUSTICE

From the institution of the first U.S. immigration law, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, a period of restricted naturalization favoring northern Europeans lasted until 1952. Until our current time, many US immigration laws and policies have been racially and ethnically discriminatory. Although US laws are no longer formally based on race or ethnicity, according to recent research done by scholars at New York University, a strong racial ethnic bias in our immigration policy still exists.⁷

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

The Bible teaches us that we have all been created in the image and likeness of God, and were also created to be in communion with one another. Although all do not share the same language, ethnicity, culture or color, good neighbors are commanded to engage in ministries of hospitality, love and compassion for one another, and those who are strangers.

In Deuteronomy 10:18–19, we learn that “[God] defends the causes of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the [guest], giving them food and clothing. And you are to love those who are [guests], for you yourselves were [guests] in Egypt.” Leviticus 19:33-34 teaches us, “When a guest lives with you in your land, do not mistreat the person. The [guest] living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the Lord your God.”

Compassion to a guest requires commitment and merciful works as depicted in the parable of the Good Samaritan, as found in the Gospel of Luke 10: 29-37. In this provocative story, a despised alien who is a Samaritan, stops to care for a Jewish person who was stripped, beaten and robbed along the Jericho Road. The alien Samaritan transcended religious customs and cultural and racial differences. The Samaritan stopped his

⁷ <http://www.scholarsstrategynetwork.org/brief/how-legacies-racism-persist-us-immigration-policy>

traveling, poured oil and wine on the man's wounds, transported him to an inn, paid for his stay, and continued to ensure his well-being after performing many sacrificial acts of love. This story of compassion teaches that God's radical inclusion is intentional, and provides a safe refuge for those who have been wounded. God works through those who remember their past journeys and are committed to love and care for their neighbors. In this story, the ethic of welcoming the alien is found in Exodus 23.9 (Do not oppress a [guest], saying you yourselves know how it feels to be aliens, because you were alien in Egypt) was an essential practice in Israel's covenant community and embodies our response to any immigration policies.

God has entrusted all with this vocation of hospitality that brings the principles of the Gospel into public policy, so that all may actualize their full potential and fulfill their destiny with justice, love and peace. Fulfillment of this shared ministry calls us to resist legislation that would make unlawful deeds of hospitality and love provided in the name of our faith.

THE RECOMMENDATION

1. Hold Bible Studies that wrestle with the questions, "Who is the stranger in our midst, why are we instructed to greet and treat him or her with love, and what forms might that love take?"

The design of the Bible Study can help address the following:

- A. To reflect on and reaffirm the Christian calling in response to the strangers in our midst
 - B. To better understand the physical and emotional plight of the immigrant and refugee
 - C. To learn about the current legal parameters governing immigrants and refugees, and to better understand current and pending immigration legislation
 - D. To equip member churches for advocacy with elected officials and within governmental structures
 - E. To allow participants to self-identify as members of the American Baptist Churches of Metropolitan New York as ones who wish to support immigrants and refugees in our community by providing services and assistance to undocumented persons who are seeking to legalize their status in America, and to accompany immigrants and refugees in solidarity and faith.
2. Institute more responsive legal avenues for workers and their families who wish to migrate to the U.S. to enter our country and work in safe, legal, and orderly settings where they will not be exploited.
 3. Help create pathways to citizenship for individuals and families who are already living in the U.S.
 4. Institute border protection policies that are consistent with humanitarian values and are designed to treat all individuals with respect, while allowing the authorities to carry out the critical task of enforcing our laws.

5. Protect and expand DACA, the Dreamers Act, and similar programs
6. Overhaul the process for refugees seeking asylum to make less onerous and faster
7. End the mass deportations of undocumented immigrants

Finally, member churches of American Baptist Churches of Metropolitan New York are asked to consider the following courses of action:

1. Diligently seek justice for immigrants and refugees.
2. Consider individual or church membership in the New Sanctuary Coalition of New York City (<http://www.newsanctuarynyc.org/>), and to be aware that there is a critical need for volunteers, particularly those who speak Spanish.
3. Receive training and participate as volunteers in the New Sanctuary Coalition's Accompaniment Program going with our immigrant friends to ICE hearings, providing presence and support.
4. Participate in weekly "Jericho Walks" held on Thursdays at 11:00 AM, circling around 26 Federal Plaza using the power of prayer to bring justice to our immigrant friends.
5. Participate in Vigil walks at 201 Varick Street on Thursdays at 5:00 PM, followed by a Community Meeting at 55 West 15th Street at 6:00 PM.
6. Host "Know Your Rights" clinics in our local churches, providing practical information to immigrant members of our communities.
7. Prayerfully consider the possibility of becoming a Sanctuary Church.
8. Include immigration as an important focus for Bible Study and other church based education programs.
9. Incorporate the theme of justice for immigrants in worship via preaching, teaching, and liturgy (examples are attached).