

Mennonite Central Committee U.S. Executive Committee Meeting
Mennonite Central Committee and Immigration Legislation in Congress
March 24-25, 2006
Meeting Place, Akron, PA

MCC U.S. started immigration work because of the needs expressed from constituent churches in immigrant communities around the country. MCC U.S. is responding to the scriptural teaching from Leviticus 19:33-34: "When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do (the stranger) wrong. The stranger who sojourns with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love (the stranger) as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."

Like the Israelites in Egypt, many Mennonites were themselves strangers in the United States when they first migrated to this country. God expected the Israelites to show kindness and assist the foreigners when they had settled and become established. So, too, we must show kindness and assist the foreigners now that have settled and become established in this land.

Many immigrants to the United States face an unwelcoming culture when they cross the border: reduced public services, strengthened border security, increased workplace raids and backlogs in visa processing. For undocumented immigrants, the reception is often hostile, especially since the events of September 11, 2001 linked immigrants and terrorists in many minds.

The Pew Hispanic Center estimates that there are about 11.5 to 12 million undocumented immigrants living here in the United States. They also estimate that 64 percent of children living with undocumented families are U.S. citizens by birth. These undocumented immigrants either entered the country without valid documents, overstayed their visas or violated the terms of their admission. The Pew Hispanic Center also includes in this number of undocumented immigrants those who have received Temporary Protected Status (TPS) and people who have unresolved asylum applications. TPS recipients have the right to live and work here in the United States on a temporary basis.

In light of the events of September 11, a sluggish economy and the high number of undocumented immigrants here in the United States, the House of Representatives approved an immigration bill on December 16, 2005. This bill was drafted by Representatives James Sensenbrenner and Peter King (H.R. 4437). The bill would make being in the country without documents an aggravated felony, criminalize church workers and social service providers who assist undocumented immigrants and further militarize the U.S./Mexico border.

The Senate Judiciary Committee approved its immigration reform proposal on March 27, 2006, and the full Senate will now take up the debate. The proposal contains a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants borrowed from a previous proposal by Senators Edward Kennedy and John McCain. It does not criminalize those who assist undocumented immigrants. In addition, it includes the DREAM Act and the AgJOBS Act, which would grant permanent residency to certain students and farmworkers, respectively.

Unfortunately, the proposal also mandates a doubling of Border Patrol agents, continuing the militarization of the U.S./Mexico border that has led to increased deaths, as migrants are forced to attempt crossing in remote desert areas. It remains to be seen how the Senate will amend the bill to address its flaws and protect its merits. Following the Senate's approval, the bill will be conferenced with the House version, H.R. 4437.

As a Christian agency committed to peace and justice, MCC U.S. represents its constituent churches in working with immigrants to provide physical, emotional and spiritual assistance to those in need. MCC has a long history of welcoming strangers, growing out of its belief that Jesus calls us to feed the hungry, give a cup of water to the thirsty, clothe the naked and welcome the stranger (Matthew 25:35).

Historically, Mennonites and Brethren in Christ have chosen not to obey laws that are inconsistent with Jesus' teachings. Even before the law made provisions for conscientious objectors, many refused to serve in the military. Others have chosen not to pay military taxes. In the 1980s some Anabaptist congregations broke the law to become sanctuary churches for refugees fleeing violence in Central America.

Therefore:

1. We commit ourselves to helping anyone who asks including the strangers/immigrants in our midst regardless of their legal status in this country.
2. We are committed to obeying God rather than human authority, especially when laws call us to harm others and block us from efforts to protect life.
3. We commit ourselves to support MCC workers who are working with immigrants by:
 - a. praying for them, their families and their work on a daily basis.
 - b. giving them our moral support as they continue in their work assignments.
 - c. providing the financial resources needed for any legal defense or penalties imposed because of the work we have asked them to do.
4. We will partner with denominations to provide financial resources to assist individuals and congregations with legal costs.
5. We encourage our constituent denominations to call on area conferences, districts and congregations to provide financial help and set aside monies in case pastors or other church workers would need any legal help.

We also:

1. Call the U.S. government to enact realistic, humane and just comprehensive immigration reform.
2. Ask that any immigration reform provide workers with sufficient labor protections, reunite separated families, end militarization of the U.S./Mexico border, allow workers to come and go safely across the border and create a path to legalization for those undocumented immigrants who wish to stay.
3. Ask the government not to force church workers to choose between obeying the dictates of their faith and the dictates of their government.
4. Call the U.S. government to create economic policies that will assist developing countries and provide for fair trade. If people are able to provide a decent living for their families, many would choose to stay in their home countries.
5. Ask the U.S. government to make trade agreements and institutions more accountable.

Note:

This immigration statement was passed by the MCC U.S. Executive Committee on March 25, 2006. **

Revisions of this statement were made in light of the work done by the Senate Judiciary Committee on March 27.