

# Immigrants and Refugees: To Love the Sojourner

## A Resolution of The United Methodist Church

### 1. Biblical/Theological Basis

The Bible is full of stories of sojourners, strangers without homes, whom God called people to protect. The Israelites - God's chosen people - were themselves sojourners for 40 years after the exodus from Egypt as they sought the promised land. God did not let the Israelites forget that they had been without a homeland for such a long time; the ethic of welcoming the sojourner was woven into the very fabric of the Israelite confederacy. It was more than an ethic, it was a command of God. "Do not mistreat or oppress a stranger; you know how it feels to be a stranger, because you were sojourners in the land of Egypt" (Exodus 23:9).

A "sojourn" implies uprootedness; sojourners are uprooted people. At times uprooted people in the Bible were looking for a home, but other times they were not. Often they were telling those that would listen that the real home was a spiritual home - with God providing accompaniment. Sojourners were messengers. The message they sent then as well as today is that the Spirit of God is with each of us as we sojourn through life. We are all on a journey, and God is with us. Such was the message of Moses and many of the prophets; such was the message of John the Baptist, a voice crying in the wilderness; and such was the message of Jesus Christ, whose own life was characterized by uprootedness. The infant Jesus and his family had to flee to Egypt to avoid persecution and death; they became refugees sojourning in Egypt until they could come home. Jesus was a person on the move. Jesus' ministry occurred throughout the countryside of Judea, and his life was marked by uprootedness: "Foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (Matthew 8:20). Jesus made a point of spending time with the poor, the powerless, the despised and rejected. Jesus did so while spreading the word of God's steadfast love, the same love spoken of in the Book of Hosea: "And I will betroth you unto me forever; yes, I will betroth you unto me in righteousness, and in justice, and in loving kindness, and in mercies" (Hosea 2:19).

Jesus embodied the love of God to the world and modeled how we are to act with love and compassion for the sojourner. In fact, Jesus' most pointed description of how human beings should behave once they are aware of God's love is in the story of the Good Samaritan in which the love of God is expressed through the compassion of a stranger: "But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was: and when he saw him, he had compassion on him, and went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine, and set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him" (Luke 10:33-34). This is the radical love of God as expressed by Jesus Christ. It transcends race, nationality and religion and is a love that cries for justice and peace; it is a love that is sorely needed today.

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## 2. Global Uprootedness

We live in a world where there are over 22 million people who are refugees, another 26 million who are internally displaced, and millions more who seek asylum or are migrants looking to find a way out of poverty. No nation can afford to turn a blind eye toward these realities. People who must flee their lands because they have no choice are today's uprooted populations. They are given different labels depending on their circumstances: refugees - persons who have been officially recognized by the United Nations as having a well-founded fear of persecution because of their political affiliation, religion, race, nationality or membership in a particular social group or opinion; asylum seekers - those who have left their homelands and are applying for political asylum in the country to which they have fled (in the United States, applying for asylum is a right which can be exercised); internally displaced - people who are displaced within the borders of their own lands because of civil strife but who cannot receive the protection of the international community because of the principle of national sovereignty; economic migrants - those who flee dire poverty in search of employment and a way to feed their families. No matter what label they are given, they are usually vulnerable people in need of compassion and protection. Most of them are women and children; often the women are subjected to the brutality of sexual violence.

Even when refugees are allowed to return home they face monumental problems such as the possibility of being killed or maimed by land mines, millions of which have been left behind by former combatants. An example is Angola, a country which has more land mines than any other in the world. It is estimated that 20 million mines were laid during the 20-year civil war there. Today, it is estimated that 70,000 Angolans have required amputations because of contact with mines. It is also estimated that there are between 150 and 200 land mine victims every week in Angola.

It is clear that the uprooted are vulnerable and need the protection of the international community. Their numbers are growing as more people worldwide become victims of wars, economic injustice, and environmental degradation. According to the [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees \(UNHCR\)](#), it is estimated that one out of every 130 people worldwide has been forced into flight. Because of civil wars and ethnic-based conflict, political repression and gross human rights violations, refugees are being produced at a rate of 10,000 per day. The 1990s is fast becoming the "decade of uprootedness."

Most refugees come from the South and remain in the South, often in countries of first asylum where conditions are barely humane. It is a myth that all people on the move wish to come to the nations of the North, but those who do, come because it is their last hope for life. They have no choice. The nations of the industrialized North who are better equipped to provide safe haven to uprooted persons are currently lacking the moral and political will to do so. Instead, the governments of these nations are reacting to a worldwide rise in xenophobia and racism by sharply curtailing existing programs benefiting newcomers and by instituting restrictive legislation designed to satisfy the nativists in their constituencies. Uprootedness is seen by the governments of the industrialized North as a problem to be dealt with by force rather than as a complex phenomenon needing coherent and humane solutions

on a global scale. Uprooted people are looked upon as the cause of societal problems and are being blamed for increasing economic difficulties. Consequently, even refugees fleeing persecution are denied their human rights and the protection they need to save their lives, and they are summarily excluded and ostracized by governments. In Europe, many governments are implementing policies that are designed to prevent asylum seekers from successfully finding refuge within their borders. In Norway, for example, according to law, asylum seekers may not apply for asylum unless they have close ties with Norway.

Such a law dispenses with equity in asylum procedures. The recent increase in the number of uprooted persons demonstrates that the international community, including the churches, must focus more attention on understanding and alleviating the causes of forced human uprootedness, as well as responding to the consequences.

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### 3. Immigration and Asylum in the United States

Nearly all the citizens of the United States have ancestors who emigrated from other parts of the world. Since the 17th century, millions of immigrants went to the United States, often to seek freedom from religious persecution and broader opportunities in a new land. No other nation has welcomed so many immigrants from so many parts of the world, and no other nation has taken such pride in its immigrant roots. Nevertheless, the history of immigration policy in the United States has been heavily influenced by economic and labor force needs, as well as by systemic racism. The United States has at times encouraged the presence of immigrants who could provide the cheap hard labor to build canals and railroads, help with the harvesting of crops, and supply industry with needed workers. At other times, however, United States laws have systematically excluded immigrants because of racial, ethnic, religious or other prejudicial reasons. Examples are the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the Immigration Act of 1924, the Immigration Act of 1965, and the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986.

While the United States has a long history of immigration, its experience as a country of first asylum is relatively new and appears minor in comparison to that of many other countries of the world. Countries in Africa have opened their borders to millions of asylum seekers, while the United States has only had to work with numbers of asylum applications in the hundreds of thousands. The 1980s and early 1990s witnessed an influx of persons seeking asylum in the United States from Central America, including Haiti and Cuba. All of these groups fled a combination of dire poverty, government repression or persecution, and general strife in their homelands. This influx of refugees to the United States was unexpected, and many - particularly the Haitian, Salvadoran, and Guatemalan people - were denied the protection of asylum they so desperately needed.

In the United States, the federal government is proposing legislation to prevent further influxes of migrants and asylum seekers reinforcing the borders and instituting restrictive measures. The United States has engaged in a policy of forced repatriation of unwanted Central Americans, Haitian, Cuban, and Chinese asylum seekers in

violation of international law. It has also engaged in detention practices and forced repatriation of Chinese people and others without benefit of fair and equal protection under law. Current legislative initiatives seek to reduce family immigration by 32 percent, slash refugee admissions by over 50 percent, introduce a national identification system, and bar legal immigrants' access to government assistance, leaving them vulnerable when they fall on hard times.

In California, the passage of Proposition 187, an initiative which would deny public education to the children of undocumented persons, would also deny them non-emergency health care and require government employees, private individuals, and providers to report individuals whom they suspect are undocumented to the authorities. The implementation of the initiative is currently pending in court. In the meantime, those who look or sound foreign already suffer from discrimination in both the workplace and in daily life.

Immigrant bashing, a particularly virulent form of anti-immigrant bias, seems stronger than ever in this atmosphere of misinformation, mistrust, and fear of economic instability. Unwilling to face the reality of their leaders' failure to deal expeditiously and honestly with their nation's adjustment to the new global society, many people in the United States have let themselves be vulnerable to the hysteria that says they are no longer in control of their borders or their destiny.

**Therefore, we call upon The United Methodist Church, in collaboration with other ecumenical organizations, to urge the government of the United States:**

1. To encourage and support international economic policies that promote sustainable development; and that use capital, technology, labor, and land in a manner that gives priority to employment for all people and the production of basic human necessities, thereby reducing migration pressures.
2. To alleviate conditions of uprootedness by working toward the elimination of all forms of warfare and by supporting agrarian reform, social justice, and an adequate measure of economic security for all peoples.
3. To take decisive action to eliminate the sale and international trade in land mines and provide technical assistance to facilitate their removal from lands to which refugees are returning.
4. To withhold all support - diplomatic, military and financial - to governments with a documented recent history of abuses and disregard for human rights, particularly the right of asylum.
5. To provide a fair and generous resettlement policy as one of the ways of ensuring meaningful protection and a durable solution for refugees.
6. To adopt reasonable standards for consideration as refugees for those seeking asylum and eliminate within the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) all abuses of civil and human rights including such practices as the violation of due process, denial of bond, and hasty deportation of people who are undocumented or overstayed; and to eliminate restrictive measures applied to asylum seekers at ports

of entry, such as summary exclusion without benefit of adequate counseling.

7. To monitor all attempted reforms on immigration and refugee policy and practices in order to ensure fair and adequate process in regard to asylum petitions, judicial review, refugee resettlement priorities, and immigrant categories.

8. To review and reject all legislative measures that propose summary exclusion for bona fide asylum seekers, and to ensure access to counsel and meaningful review of asylum claims by an immigration judge.

9. To ensure protection of the basic human rights of immigrants and refugees such as the right to an education, adequate health care, due process and redress of law, protection against social and economic exploitation, the right to a cultural and social identity, and access to the social and economic life of the nation whether in documented or undocumented status.

As people of faith we are called to justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God (Micah 6:8). We must work for justice and peace for all people and envision a world where institutions are transformed into true servants of the people, full of the compassion exemplified by Jesus Christ.

Therefore, in addition to advocating for the above measures, we call upon United Methodist churches and agencies:

1. To support international efforts to promote sustainable development policies designed to alleviate human suffering and counteract some of the root causes of forced migration.

2. To advocate for protection of uprooted women and children against all forms of violence and to call for full legal protection of children in the midst of armed conflict.

3. To provide assistance for projects of relief to refugees and displaced persons.

4. To provide assistance for projects of economic development for refugees and returnees.

5. To provide sponsorships for refugees through local congregations.

6. To denounce and oppose the rise of xenophobic and racist reactions against newcomers in the United States and elsewhere, and to support any and all efforts to build bridges between people of diverse ethnicities and cultures.

7. To continue to work with community-based organizations to provide forums for citizens to voice concerns, educate one another, and confront the problems of racism and xenophobia as obstacles to building community.

8. To work with civic and legal organizations to support communities that are now or will be affected by the destructive enactment of policies like California's Proposition 187.

9. To provide pastoral care and crisis intervention to individuals and families who are refugees and asylum seekers.

10. To speak out, make declarations, and adopt resolutions to condemn and delegitimize violence against foreigners.

We recommend that the General Board of Church and Society and the General Board of Global Ministries:

1. Monitor cases of possible human rights violations in the areas of immigration and give guidance to United Methodists in responding to such cases.

2. Advocate for human rights (including political, economic, and civil) for all people, and especially for strangers that sojourn in the land.

3. Advocate against legislation that seeks to establish national identification systems.

4. Continue explorations of solutions to the problems of asylum seekers and undocumented people.

5. Lead United Methodists throughout the United States in the fight against nativism and continue to respond to the current threat against refugees and immigrants.

6. Lead the churches throughout the United States in recognizing the contributions newcomers have made which have culturally and economically enriched the nation.

7. Provide technical and financial assistance to local churches in active ministry with refugees and asylum seekers.

8. Continue the task of educating United Methodists about issues related to refugees, immigrants, and migrants.

9. Organize campaigns to counter and prevent racism, xenophobia, and hostility toward uprooted people.

10. Develop materials to educate the churches on immigration as well as on issues related to refugees and asylum seekers.

11. Assist the churches in advocating for fair and just immigration laws and practice.

12. Support communities and congregations by prayer and action where such measures as Proposition 187 may be implemented at any time in the future, and develop strategies and action plans to counter similar initiatives in other states.



[Refugees Information Packet](#)  
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