Engage: Youth Ministry & Contemporary Issues
Immigration: Bridging Borders in Youth Ministry

Introduction:
Throughout the 2016 presidential campaign, candidates addressed immigration policy and held the issue central to their platforms. In keeping with his campaign promises, President Trump has focused heavily on immigration issues. On February 15, 2019, President Trump declared a national emergency at the southern border of the United States. Statistics show, however, that most undocumented immigrants don’t actually come in through the southern border. Instead, they enter the country legally and overstay their visas. Simply put, President Trump’s emergency declaration inflamed already hot-button issues—immigration, border security, and human rights.

When it comes to immigration, it seems Christians on either side of the political aisle try to use the Bible in their favor. But what does the Bible actually say about immigration? How can we, as Christians, best love God and love our neighbors—our immigrant neighbors, our refugee neighbors, our young Dreamer neighbors? In this issue of Engage, scholars, activists, and pastors from various political and theological perspectives address how the conversation around immigration is tethered to the work of faithful youth ministry.

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The Immigration Debate and the Bible – It’s Complicated

When it comes to attitudes towards outsiders and foreign people in the Bible, nothing warms the heart like Exodus 23:9: “You shall not oppress a resident alien. You know the heart of an alien, for you yourselves were aliens in the land of Egypt.” Indeed, hospitality toward outsiders is expressed in many different ways in numerous biblical passages (Exod 22:21; Lev 19:33; Deut 10:18; 24:17; 27:19; Isa 56:6-8). If these passages are taken in isolation, they appear to show that a xenophobic, hostile attitude directed at immigrants is unbiblical, un-Christian, and contrary to the Gospel.

Unfortunately, it’s a little more complicated. These heartwarming sentiments appear in the same Bible that contains some extremely xenophobic verses. Anti-immigrant crusaders might see their agendas reflected in passages like Deut 7:1-5 or 23:3-8 (Hebrew verses: 4-9), which are quite hostile to certain foreigners such as Canaanites, Ammonites, and Moabites.

In addition, the word often translated “resident alien” or “alien” (gēr) is probably not a reference to all foreigners, but a certain kind of landless foreigner who, in most instances, is dependent on an Israelite landowner. Consequently, the “resident alien” is integrated into Israelite society in a way in which other foreigners are not—though the word “assimilated” would probably be too strong here. It is also clear that the “resident alien” is supposed to be socially inferior to the Israelite upon which he is dependent. These legal distinctions within the Bible could be easily cited as biblical warrants for harsh, hostile immigration policies.

There were also religious restrictions placed on the resident alien. For example, resident aliens were required to refrain from worshiping their native gods within Israel’s borders. They were, with Israelites, not permitted to eat leavened bread during Passover (Exod 12:19), required to refrain from work on the Sabbath (Exod 20:8-10; Deut 5:12-14), and had to participate in the “affliction” of Yom Kippur (Lev 16:29). Also notable is Ruth, a Moabite woman who eventually lives among Israelites and marries an Israelite, but only after she explicitly abandons her national gods (Ruth 1:15-16). One can imagine anti-Muslim bigots having a field day with these passages.

These complications suggest that perhaps we should not expect Scripture to unequivocally support any modern-day political view. One alternative to such an expectation is to see our engagement with Scripture as an opportunity for reflection and the interrogation of our own values. Though inspired by an encounter with God, biblical writers might also bring their own issues and social location to their relationship with God and, consequently, express that in their writing. Because these texts are a part of our canon and written by people that we believe had an
authentic relationship with God, we must own them. By owning them, engaging them, and not just waiving them away or ignoring them, we force ourselves to take seriously the important messages that can be communicated, even in disturbing passages.

One could see passages that are hostile to foreigners as examples of how security and social cohesion were important to these writers. These passages attest to a very real, historically persistent, and genuine human fear of outsiders. Additionally, a group’s sense of security and social cohesion can feel threatened by the presence of foreigners, especially foreigners who are deemed to be threatening. We certainly see such ideas expressed in the immigration debate today. The fact that these writers put their anxieties into the mouth of God shows us how deeply significant they were to them. It also shows us that people can project their profoundest insecurities and fears onto God, even to the point of promoting violence.

In response to xenophobic, unwelcoming sentiment both in Scripture and in the contemporary world, we could, as many already do, lift up the expressions of hospitality and openness to foreigners found in Scripture. These more welcoming passages, despite their complexity and embeddedness in their historical context, also attest to very real, historically persistent, and deeply human impulses such as compassion and empathy. Using these texts as a starting point, we can ask how hostility toward refugees and those fleeing extreme violence corresponds with the empathy reflected in these passages. We should also ask where any compassion and generosity can be found in contemporary anti-immigrant rhetoric. We could further point out that the story of Sodom in Genesis 19 actually deals with the sexual abuse of foreigners and hostility towards outsiders—not homosexuality (a graphic reminder of how bad things can get if we nurture our hatred of the stranger). The fiery end of Sodom should also give great pause to a nation where sexual abuse in its immigrant detention centers seems to be an epidemic.

Historically speaking, it seems better to cultivate and develop the more welcoming ideas found in the Bible and understand xenophobic passages as lessons about the all-too-human emotions that often accompany our relationships with those deemed “foreign.” When the Church develops theologies of exclusion, we get disastrous results like the “Curse of Ham” or the use of the Canaanite conquest to justify the extermination of Native peoples. Extreme nationalism and racism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which some Christians supported, were the foundations for two highly destructive World Wars. I could go on about the many toxic theologies that have developed over the years, but our choices are clear. The path of exclusion leads to disaster and the very chaos and destruction that the fear-based viewpoint seeks to avoid. The path of empathy opens us up to new ways of thinking about how to welcome many different kinds of people into our communities, despite the social or economic challenges immigration may pose.
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Response: Elizabeth Biedrzycki

The River

From the right vantage point, there is nothing surprising about it. It is like any other river—flowing water, rocky beds, green trees, and shrubs extending along its banks. And like civilizations have done throughout time, people have made life along it. It has proven rich for agricultural development, providing sustenance for generations. In the pervasive heat, it has brought coolness and refreshment. And for the thirsty, it has brought life. However, in addition to these things, today this river represents something different. It has also become a symbol of political polarization, social disunity, and broken systems. This dissonance reveals incredible opportunity for sacred disruption.

The Rio Grande Valley (“the Valley”) references the area of Texas along the northern bank of the Rio Grande River valley located along the state’s southernmost tip. The nutrient-richness of the Valley’s soil matches that of the minds and hearts of the young people growing up in this region. Just as the fertile edges of an ecological system create conditions for nourishment, the edges of these two countries united by a river have created unique conditions to nurture the entrepreneurial DNA of the culture, foster the grit to rebuild and start new communities, and cultivate the essence of “familia.” This is the environment many of the students attending the University of Texas at Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV) have grown up in, either on the U.S. or Mexico side of the river.

Just across the border from Edinburg (where the main campus of UTRGV sits) is Reynosa, Mexico. With 41.95 homicides for every 100,000 residents last year, Reynosa easily makes Mexico’s Citizens’ Council for Public Security’s 2017 ranking of the 50 most violent cities in the world. Forty-two of the fifty cities listed were in Latin American countries. This daily and directly affects the climate of these Texas border towns. But its effects extend beyond physical violence, resulting in significant economic impacts and generational ramifications manifesting in social spheres such as education, poverty, and racism. The Church’s historical response to the nuances of the Valley are important to what the future of its existence looks like. And the Church’s response going forward affects the trajectory of its impact on communities and neighborhoods across the country.

The Baptist Student Ministry (BSM) at UTRGV works among complicated border dynamics, but also walks alongside young adults seeking to face those dynamics head-on with a rich theology and a deep understanding of who they are in the world. With only two full-time staff and 12 part-time staff, this ministry works with 1,100 students each week across both the Edinburg and Brownsville campuses. A few casual conversations with these students reveal both the complexities they experience daily and the goodness they curate and perpetuate as a community. Discipleship is not merely practiced through biblical literacy, but through helping students fill out FAFSA forms, walk through the immigration system, start new businesses, and develop
community engagement programs. This is all done while carefully tending to the trauma many of them carry back and forth across the border and gently balanced with high expectations of leadership development.

Last October, the BSM used an Innovation Grant from Leadership Education at Duke Divinity to pilot a three-day accelerator program for ambitious adventurers and entrepreneurs, as well as investors and institutional leaders. While paradigmatically similar, there were clear differences between this new process and a traditional accelerator. The project addressed design challenges the students face collectively while collaboratively creating solutions through human-centered design tools, all in context to their unique stories. At the end of the program, they invited the investors and institutional leaders into their stories and ideas through a pitch and pledge gathering. The purpose of this was twofold: 1) for them to realize the potential of their ideas and 2) to give them an opportunity (some for the first time) to share their stories and ideas in a public setting.

Simultaneous to these three days, the investors and institutional leaders walked through an empathy-building pilgrimage. During the pilgrimage, our three main goals were for participants 1) to gain empathy and understanding for the realities facing these young people daily, which influence the ideas they have and innovation they explore; 2) to walk into this pitch and pledge experience with a deeper understanding of what investment means and a broader picture of what it could look like to invest not only in an individual but in an ecology; and 3) to return to their places of leadership with new eyes for “borders” in their own contexts, allowing the experience to impact their work going forward.

The fruits of capacity-building programs like this (and others being done through the BSM) sometimes look like new businesses, such as the student-run coffee and pastry truck which launched in March, and other expressions of imaginative economic models intertwined with Christian social innovation. But other times, these fruits also look like new immersive learning experiences around border theology. The balance of launching new work along the border with educating the Church in the U.S. about border realities stays at the forefront of the work being done by the BSM. The collective work is viewed as a gift back to the United States in a time of great political, social, economic, and spiritual divide in the country.

What if a river could be a place of unity rather than division? And what if we lived as if we were citizens of a kingdom which transcends country lines and politicized issues? Border work takes on many faces and has many layers, including migrating families, young adults realizing a potential their parents have fought for, native social entrepreneurs launching goodness into their communities, and more. Each effort demands a kingdom-sized vision where flourishing is nourished at a systemic level by the collaboration and cooperation of all. In addition to this, if our communities were being honest, we would acknowledge the pervasive borders which exist in neighborhoods and between people across the country. May we learn the lessons this river is
teaching us all. Life and flourishing can exist across difference. And gospel-inspired Christians can be at the forefront of catalyzing that work.

Elizabeth Biedrzycki is the South Texas Regional Coordinator at the Baptist General Convention of Texas. She has worked with the convention for eight years and in 2015 transitioned to San Antonio to encourage collaboration among the 11 Baptist institutions there. Her new position involves developing relationships with innovative, emerging Christian leaders across the state, and designing new leadership development initiatives in the Rio Grande Valley. She is a graduate of Abilene Christian University, a member of the Board of Advocates at Truett Theological Seminary at Baylor University, and serves on the advisory council of Leadership Education at Duke Divinity School.
Response: Werner Ramirez

The Consolation Prize That Changed My Life

I hated spring break when I was in high school. Each spring our youth group would go to Mexico for a mission trip. I loved youth group more than anything, so you would think this would have been my bread and butter. But I couldn’t go, because I did not have the proper documentation to get back into the United States. I could not risk leaving the country. I cried every year as I said goodbye and watched the vans leave with my best friends as they went to serve the Lord without me.

I was five years old when my parents, my one-year-old sister, and I moved to the United States from Guatemala. I still remember my Tia Lily crying as she dropped us at the airport. My parents told me we were going on “vacation.” I was confused about why Tia Lily was crying if we were just going to come back in a few weeks. A few months into kindergarten, I realized this was no vacation. I mean, who goes to school on vacation?

My father worked for a Christian organization in Guatemala that was dedicated to helping the poor with food, finances, and education. He worked on the accounting side and taught local pueblos how to manage their finances. This was during the Guatemalan civil war, when helping the poor was sometimes seen as communism. My dad is not a communist (he has told me many times), but as a Christian he saw it as his duty to help the poor.

Things in Guatemala had gotten dangerous. My dad’s co-workers were receiving death threats. One day, my dad noticed a man following him everywhere he went. That same night, two men were waiting by our house and began to approach him. My dad ran into my uncle’s house next door to find safety. The men eventually left, but this was enough of a scare for my parents to make a drastic decision: three days later we were going on “vacation” to the United States.

I was always somewhat aware of our immigration status. I remember being about eight years old and my dad asking the immigration officer for more time in the country. I remember that Pastor Will from Geneva Presbyterian Church came with us as support. We were denied asylum in 1992, but because of some glitch in the system, we kept getting work permits. Each year was a kind of limbo as we waited for permanent residency.

In the summer of 2003, we got a letter saying that we would no longer receive work permits and that we would be getting deportation letters soon. Here we were: me, a 17-year-old who scarcely remembered Guatemala, and my sister, an eighth grader who barely spoke Spanish. The possibility of being deported devastated me. I felt more American than Guatemalan. I couldn't be any more American! Yet I was in danger of being sent back “home.”
A lawyer advised us on accelerating our immigration case and avoiding deportation. It would be expensive. My parents didn’t have the money—but I did.

Four years earlier, I had competed in a contest during half-time of a Women’s World Cup match in Chicago. I could’ve won $1 million if I’d been able to sink a soccer ball into a hole two inches bigger than the ball from 25 yards away. The crowd of 65,000 at Soldier Field gave a compassionate sigh when I missed the shot. But I bet they didn’t feel too bad for me when they heard that the consolation prize was $25,000.

I had been saving that money for college. With complete humility and vulnerability, my parents asked if they could borrow it to speed up the immigration process. But I could not let them “borrow” that money. I knew that I had won it for a reason, and it became clear that the reason was for our family to stay in this country. I happily gave my family the money, and in 2004, we became permanent residents of the United States.

I share this story for two reasons. First, may it remind you that the rhetoric we hear—that people who are without proper documentation are “animals” and “criminals”—is false. We must look at our siblings coming from other countries as people made in the image of God. The stranger worships in your churches. The stranger goes to school with your students. The stranger is your neighbor. Will we teach our children to regard them with fear, or to see them as beloved children of God? Second, may we all aspire to be like Pastor Will. Buy yourself a clergy collar, and if a family allows you, attend immigration meetings with them. Help them fill out the paperwork. It can be long and utterly confusing, so an extra eye is very helpful. Also, most people do not have $25,000 lying around to “speed up” the immigration process. This is another opportunity for you and your church to champion our siblings who lack proper documentation.

My parents continue to be generous people who look out for the poor. There are many more Ramirez families in this country—people like my parents who have come seeking refuge. Do not let fear keep you from welcoming them.

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Rev. Werner Ramirez is a Guatemalan immigrant who grew up in Long Beach, CA. He jokes that he did not get into much trouble growing up because he has great parents who got him cable television and took him to church. Werner is an ordained minister of word and sacrament in the Presbyterian Church (USA). He holds a Master of Divinity and a Master of Arts in Christian Education & Spiritual Formation from Princeton Theological Seminary. Werner has worked in youth ministry for over a decade on both coasts and in suburban and urban contexts. He currently lives in Queens, NY, with his wonderful wife April, and serves as the Associate Pastor for Youth and Young Adult Ministries at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in Manhattan.
Seated at a wooden table in a child-sized chair too small to comfortably hold my adult body, I was surprised by the mix of excitement and nervousness I felt leading a group of children in a discussion on the book of Exodus. Just weeks before, mass protests across the country had erupted, demanding the Trump administration reunite children that had been separated from their families at the border. Our church, Southside Presbyterian in Tucson, Arizona is just 60 miles north of the border between the United States and Mexico. Migrant justice activism and organizing has long been interwoven through the life of the congregation. The relevancy of the Scripture we were studying to the immediate political context was overwhelming. I felt hesitant, wondering where our conversation about Exodus would go.

After sharing a brief snack of grapes, crackers, and apple juice, our Sunday school class began our lesson about the Israelites grumbling in the desert, yearning for a solid meal, even wishing to be back in bondage in Egypt. We learned about God’s response—providing quail, manna, and water. We then discussed God’s instructions to take as much as one needed for each day, but no more. I asked the students if they had any ideas about how God provides for people who are hungry and thirsty in the desert in present day. In unison, multiple students shouted out, “No More Deaths!” They were referring to the grassroots coalition No More Deaths that leaves water and food in the desert for migrants crossing the border.

Growing up in the congregation that is known as “the Birthplace of the Sanctuary Movement,” these students have worshipped with families living on the church grounds seeking refuge from deportation. They are already intimately aware of the politics of the border and its ill-effects. The students regularly see church leaders collecting signatures in support of migrant-justice initiatives, tabling for local humanitarian aid organizations, and accompanying migrants to asylum hearings. For many, the Sanctuary Movement brings to mind daring stories of government surveillance, felony trials, and the underground railroad. But over the past 30 years, the Sanctuary Movement has evolved with room for everyone to contribute, including children and youth. At the center of the Sanctuary Movement at Southside Presbyterian is a commitment to building the beloved community and keeping families together.

Southside Presbyterian Church made history 37 years ago by publicly declaring itself a sanctuary congregation and sparking a movement. Centuries of oppression, violence, poverty, and U.S.-backed dictatorships in South and Central America drove thousands of people north to seek asylum in the United States in the early 1980s. The United States government responded by denying asylum requests and deporting people to their home countries. In response, a network of people formed and began to house and transport people to safety in Canada where they could attain asylum status. The movement lost momentum in the early 90s but regained momentum in May 2014 when Daniel Neyoy Ruiz, a 36-year-old Mexican immigrant, husband, father, and
resident of Tucson, Arizona received a letter from Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) ordering Daniel to appear for voluntary deportation. At the time of receiving the letter, Daniel had maintained employment in Tucson for over a decade. Deportation would have torn Daniel from his wife and son. Rather than appearing voluntarily for deportation, Daniel and his family entered Southside Presbyterian Church and declared their intention to stay until his order of deportation was given administrative closure. The strategy worked. Twenty-eight days later, Daniel was granted a stay of deportation, meaning ICE would not seek to deport Daniel.

Southside members are active not only in local efforts to provide emergency shelter and food for migrants, but also in organizing efforts to extend sanctuary beyond the church walls by working to end mass incarceration of migrants, collecting signatures in order to keep local law enforcement agents from cooperating with ICE, or leaving water and food in the desert for migrants.

The work of sanctuary is not just for adults. Young people from Southside volunteer at local shelters for migrants, canvas for migrant-justice organizations, and have learned to be flexible, accommodating, and respectful of families living in sanctuary at the church. One afternoon last summer during a junior high youth group, our group was joined by two visitors—4 and 6-year-old siblings who were living in sanctuary at the church at the time. That particular Sunday, the siblings wandered into the youth room to grab some toys and were delighted to see other youth present, albeit much older. They ran and jumped on the couches next to the older youth and insisted on staying. The students laughed and helped the two read and sing along to the words of the songs we sang. While it might not seem like much, the very act of making space to include others is at the heart of the Sanctuary Movement.

Social movements—including the Sanctuary Movement—are often defined by their charismatic leaders, the exciting events covered by the press, and the repression that usually ensues. Specifically, the work of the Sanctuary Movement has often been defined as the use of church buildings to keep law enforcement out and away from harassing families avoiding deportation. But what I’ve learned from my brief time at Southside is that the Sanctuary Movement is made up of the small acts of community that make room for others. When our nation’s immigration system is determined to keep people out, being in community with people deemed as “other” by the State is a radical act of resistance. Discussing Exodus and current events with the children of Southside intimidated me because I initially failed to see how they live, act, and embody the Sanctuary Movement. My time working with the children and youth of Southside has made me realize—they are the Sanctuary Movement.

Stefan Warner has served as the Director of Children and Youth Ministry of Southside Presbyterian Church in Tucson, Arizona since the summer of 2018. Originally from Harrah,
Oklahoma, Stefan previously served as Minister of Youth & Young Adults at Church of the Open Arms (UCC) in Oklahoma City. He has additional experience in a variety of roles in youth ministry settings with progressive Catholics, Baptists, Mennonites, and more. Prior to moving to Arizona, Stefan worked with Christian Peacemaker Teams in Iraqi Kurdistan, as well as traveled on delegations to Colombia and Grassy Narrows First Nation (Canada). Stefan is also a co-owner and Social Media Coordinator of the Fertile Ground Cooperative, a worker-owned recycling and compost business in Oklahoma City. Stefan enjoys hiking, coffee, and supporting social movements for change.
Response: Rebecca David Hensley

Gendering Immigration

The following is an excerpt from a wider work of scholarship that Rev. Hensley is writing on liberation and feminist theology. While the concept of gendering immigration might seem like a particularly academic conversation, this discussion is relevant for faith leaders who work with young people and want to help them develop a robust theological understanding of immigration, especially by recognizing the complexity at stake.

The face of immigration at the U.S. southern border is becoming increasingly Central American—and increasingly gendered. Though poverty and lack of economic opportunity are factors for migration from the entire region, these immigrants are primarily concerned with survival—as women facing brutal and widespread gendered violence, and as mothers sending their children and teens to escape extreme violence, murder, or recruitment by gangs and drug trafficking rings. And if migration has become gendered in terms of the compounded burdens on women, so also must our theological response become gendered.

In her book From Feminist Theology to Indecent Theology, Argentinian feminist theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid critiques the Church and traditional forms of theology for destroying “the sacrality of daily life” of indigenous women:

Latin American women are concerned with structures of economic and religious power, and their discourse of discrimination and oppression. Economic oppression is violent, poverty is violent. The mutilation of the God who is female into maleness is violent, and the exclusion of women from religious ministry, to which Latin American women are so accustomed in their original traditions, is very, very violent.

Althaus-Reid compares the violent story of infanticide surrounding Jesus’ birth in Matthew’s Gospel (Matthew 2:16-23, sometimes called “the Slaughter of the Innocents”) with the abuses that Latin American women have suffered in the disappearances and murders of their children. As we consider U.S. immigration policies that take a “zero tolerance” stance toward women and children escaping extreme poverty, gang warfare, and femicide, we are confronted with our own social location in the biblical narrative. Are we not the ones sending children to be slaughtered? Further, have American economic policies not undeniably contributed to the conditions which have caused these women, like Mary and Joseph with the baby Jesus in tow, to flee from violence and cross borders to maintain life? Althaus-Reid proposes that a true liberationist representation would portray Christ “as a girl prostituted in Buenos Aires in a public toilet by two men.” An honest and timely portrayal of the liberative Christ could also be a Central American victim of femicide, denied asylum and deported back to a world of violence, her body dismembered and left in the street as a public reminder of the “powers and principalities” of gang warfare.
In a chapter devoted to theology of memory, Althaus-Reid focuses on the women of El Salvador and their important contribution to the “action and reflection process of Liberation Theology.” These women learned to use their own lived experiences as their primary sources of reflection in developing a theology “characterized by changes, growth, transformation and, especially, for a corporeal theology born out of women’s bodies and their suffering during the war.”

I observed this theology of memory in practice while visiting a Base Christian Community (BCC) in Segundo Montes, El Salvador. The women pastoral leaders spend a great amount of their time teaching young people the historical memory of El Salvador. As Pastor Evelin Olimpia Romero Ramos explained, the BCC’s take a different approach than the traditional Church:

> We’ve been taught as human beings that we have no place as citizens in the world or in the Church… So we have to leave aside this tradition of teaching... We allow social reality to instruct us… Our theology is about life—Who am I? Who is the other?

While she spoke, I noticed painted on the wall behind her, a methodology of organizing practices beginning with this concept of theology of memory—“Recordar” (Remember).

As Pastor Evelin continued, she shared that the BCC pastoral team is constructing a new liturgy—a “Latin American liturgy.” It will be a liturgy of the people; a liturgy of equality; a liturgy “where women can consecrate and distribute the Eucharist.” In the words of Brazilian feminist theologian, María Clara Bingemer:

> Feeding others with one’s own body is the supreme way God chose to be definitively and sensibly present in the midst of the people… But it is women who possess in their bodiliness the physical possibility of performing the divine eucharistic action. In the whole process of gestation, childbirth, protection, and nourishing a new life, we have the sacrament of the eucharist, the divine act, happening anew.

Could it not be said that the women who are migrating from Central America are also constructing their own liturgy by participating in a eucharistic act of sacrifice for the sake of maintaining and nourishing life? If so, what is the faithful response when these women and children arrive at our border?

Throughout our nation, churches, synagogues, and other faith communities are providing sanctuary for families under the threat of deportation. Faith leaders are pressuring their local law enforcement officers to stop collaborating with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and simply hold to their oath to protect and serve their communities. Faithful people are also calling upon the U.S. government to stop the emphasis on deportation and detention, and to redirect funding to programs of social uplift in Central America. I conclude with these examples as a reminder that there is hope among hopelessness, salvation among evil. And there is
something we—all of us—can do. Historically, young people have led countless liberation movements across the globe. You need not live near the U.S./Mexico border or be of voting age to encourage and even lead your congregation in taking a stand against death-dealing immigration policies and showing compassion for our Central American sisters who are suffering the insufferable in their attempts to maintain the sacredness of life.

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Notes:
3. Ibid., 26.
4. Ibid., 84.
5. Ibid., 114-116.
7. Ibid.

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Rev. Rebecca David Hensley is a PhD student in the Joint Doctoral Program in the Study of Religion at the University of Denver and Iliff School of Theology. Her research interests involve intersectional feminist and liberative theologies, faith-based community organizing, and faith-based responses to the intersections of detention, deportation, and mass incarceration. She is also an ordained Deacon in The United Methodist Church.
Response: Liz Dong

*The Immigrant and the Image of God*

Even as an immigrant growing up in the Church, I didn’t know that the Bible had much to say about immigrants.¹ It wasn’t until later that I learned that “sojourner,” “resident-alien,” and other descriptors found in Scripture closely resembled the modern-day immigrant story—migration for economic opportunities, religious freedom, physical safety, or all of the above. Many of our biblical heroes and heroines were immigrants themselves. The Bible, apparently, has a lot to say about God’s heart for immigrants and about the unfolding of God’s master plan through the migration of people.

In an era where we are witnessing a rise—or at least a (re)surfacing—of anti-immigrant sentiment in the U.S., studies show (and my anecdotal examples suggest) that younger people tend to see immigrants in a more positive light than their older counterparts. That’s a heartening statistic. Yet, just because young people today are relatively more pro-immigrant, it doesn’t necessarily mean that those in our churches, including immigrants themselves, who voice readiness to serve immigrants or welcome refugees (and those who don’t) actually know what or how much the Bible has to say about this topic, much like me in my youth. While it is wonderful that young people are more open to new and different people and ideas, it is also important that they are not simply swept up in shifting political platforms or social movements. Rather, young people should be grounding their worldviews—on immigration or any other issue—in the enduring Word of God. I’m grateful for the youth ministers who are coming alongside them to seek and apply biblical insights.²

The immigration conversation starts with our Creator, who made humankind in God’s own image and instructed people to “fill the earth” (*Gen. 1:28*). The concept of the *Imago Dei* means that all people, no matter their immigration status or skin color, have God-given dignity and God-given potential. Whenever and wherever human dignity—let alone human life—is attacked, Christians have to stand up. I think (and hope) young people generally recognize that it is wrong for public figures to dehumanize or misrepresent immigrants on TV or on social media, or for governmental policies to separate migrant children from their parents. I hope, too, that they recognize the importance of holding these leaders accountable. Similarly, I hope our students also recognize when the English Language Learner in their high school is belittled because of his accent or the classmate in their junior high is bullied because of her cultural or religious attire, that they too, as Christians, are called to speak up. Standing up against proximate peer pressure—especially as a teenager—can be much more daunting than challenging distant people in power. As followers of Jesus who himself identified with “the stranger” (*Matthew 25:38–40*), we cannot say that we care about immigration if we don’t care about immigrants. This must start with the very people that God has placed in our schools, workplaces, and communities.
The *Imago Dei* in every person also means that immigrants are not simply people that we need to help (due to real differences in rights and privileges between the citizen and the foreigner in any country, in both ancient and modern times), but they are also people that we can learn from. Immigrants teach us about life, courage, suffering, hope, entrepreneurship, faith, and more. The immigrant story resembles, in many ways, the Christian journey—we don’t find our permanent home here and now (Hebrews 13:14). As you have conversations about immigration, focus on the people living the experience. Invite immigrants to share their stories and testimonies. Learn about their struggles – including those which are directly impacted by U.S. policy. And, importantly, get to know them beyond their immigration status.

As you and your students learn about the realities of immigration in the U.S. and around the world and about the needs of immigrants in your immediate communities and beyond, consider how you can respond. Some possible responses include educating more people about this topic, serving immigrants with translation, transportation, or other types of assistance, praying for and with them, and advocating for policies that keep families together and allow people to come out of the shadows and exploitation.

For some churches, policy advocacy might seem too “political.” However, advocacy has biblical roots (Proverbs 31:8-9), and there are scriptural and modern Christian examples of engaging with political leaders and systems without becoming partisan. Ultimately, our allegiance is to Jesus Christ and God’s Kingdom. To see God’s will done on earth as it is in heaven, we must seek both the personal holy living and the issues of systemic justice that the Bible repeatedly addresses.

Personally, as an undocumented immigrant, I found few things so empowering as having my former youth pastor advocate for me on immigration before legislators on both sides of the political aisle. He didn’t see me or my situation as too “controversial,” but tangibly demonstrated God’s unconditional love for me. My youth pastor’s actions also showcased how we can— and should—live out our faith in every sector of society with truth and grace.

The witness of the Church in welcoming the stranger doesn’t just have social consequences; it also has spiritual implications. I became a Christian as an immigrant, and my faith grew even while I was a youth wrestling with my undocumented status and my identity. While my belief in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior is about him and not my (immigrant) experiences, I—as a “stranger”—needed and had the body of Christ to point me to God and practically help me know God’s love and truth which transcend my circumstances. I know many other immigrants who have been welcomed by the Church, but I also know immigrants who have been “othered” by the Church. May we, as the Church, repent of the ways that we have placed anything above the teachings of God and instead be known by our Christ-like love for the least of these.
**Notes:**

1. For this article, the term “immigrants” is used indiscriminately to include all persons seeking a living outside of their birth country, including refugees, asylees, documented, and undocumented immigrants.

2. I will highlight some scriptural and practical insights on immigration in this article. For a more thorough presentation on a biblical perspective on immigration, I recommend *Welcoming the Stranger: Justice, Compassion, and Truth in the Immigration Debate* by Matthew Soerens and Jenny Yang and *Christians at the Border: Immigration, the Church, and the Bible* by M. Daniel Carroll R., among others.

3. Some helpful research and resources on immigration can be found at the Pew Research Center, the Cato Institute, and the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR).

4. Biblical examples include Moses, Esther, and Nehemiah. Modern Christian examples include Dietrich Bonhoeffer, William Wilberforce, and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

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Discussion Questions

1. In what ways have you heard immigration discussed in the media? In the classroom? In your home? At your church?

2. How do you think we should discuss immigration in these different contexts? Does your faith inform your opinion on immigration? Why or why not?

3. How can the Bible help inform our relationship with people who have migrated to the United States from other countries?

4. What can you do to help students who have migrated to the United States from other countries feel safe and welcome in your various communities (classroom, neighborhood, church, etc.)?

5. How have these articles helped you think differently about immigration?