

History of:

- **Our Immigrant and Anti-Immigrant Nation**
- **Our Immigrant Denomination**
- **Our Disciples' Refugee and Immigration Ministries Program**

Our Immigrant and Anti-Immigrant Nation

As a nation of immigrants, the United States also has been a nation against immigrants. At times, we have offered, in Tom Paine's words, "an asylum for the persecuted lovers of civil and religious liberty" from all over the world. At other times, we have done the persecuting of immigrants – passing discriminatory laws, denying fundamental rights, assaulting them with mob violence and even lynchings, and locking them up as possible terrorists. We have welcomed immigrants in periods of expansion and optimism and reviled them in periods of stagnation and cynicism. Our attitudes have depended primarily on domestic politics and economics.

One of our earliest public debates over immigration policy took place in the 1750s while we were still part of the British Empire. Pennsylvania was a British colony, but German immigrants were arriving in large numbers. The Germans were forming their own communities, where they spoke their own language exclusively. They had their own schools, churches, and printing presses which produced German-language newspapers. Benjamin Franklin called them "Palatine Boors" and warned if English-speaking Pennsylvanians did not take drastic steps to preserve their language and culture they would be overrun. Franklin said: "Why should Pennsylvania, founded by the English, become a Colony of Aliens, who will shortly be so numerous as to Germanize us instead of us Anglifying them, and will never adopt our Language or our Customs, any more than they can acquire our Complexion."

From colonial times until the late 19th century, there were no restrictions on immigration to the United States. Needing labor for mining, agriculture, industry, and territorial expansion, the early European settlers (and later their government) welcomed immigrants. They allowed the trade in African slaves to flourish, encouraged the immigration of Europeans displaced by the Industrial Revolution, and recruited massive numbers of Chinese and Mexican laborers. In 1790 naturalization was authorized for "free white persons" who have resided in the United States for at least two years and swear loyalty to the U.S. Constitution. The racial requirement remained until 1952.

Among those who arrived in the nation's infancy were European radicals who caused great alarm among the ruling Federalists. Worried that excessive democracy posed a threat to property and stability, Congress passed the Alien and Sedition Acts in 1798, giving the President arbitrary powers to exclude or deport foreigners deemed dangerous and to prosecute anyone who criticized the government. The Nationality Act was amended to require 14 years of residency before naturalization, which in 1802 was reduced to five years (a provision that remains today).

The first federal immigration legislation required the reporting of all entries in 1819. With the arrival of large waves from Ireland and Germany, immigration grew sharply in the 1830s to 1840s and became increasingly Roman Catholic. Simultaneously, a Protestant revival flourished which demonized Catholic immigrants. A financial panic in the 1870s, the perception of the closing of the frontier, rising labor militancy among immigrant workers, and the increasing respectability of "scientific" theories of Northern European racial superiority generated increasing restrictions on immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe and Asia. In 1882, Congress barred any new immigration from China (later expanded to include all of Asia) – the nation's first wholesale immigration restriction. In 1892, Ellis Island was opened to screen

incoming immigrants arriving from Europe. In 1906, the first language requirement was adopted for naturalization – the ability to speak and understand English. In 1917, a literacy test (supposedly a test of individual qualifications, but really aimed at restricting Southern and Eastern Europeans) was passed despite the veto of three successive presidents.

Labor strife following WWI (often led by foreign-born activists) brought on a backlash. This culminated in the Palmer Raids of 1920, in which the FBI deported "alien subversives" without trial. In 1924, Congress passed the National Origins Act, reducing annual immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe to a trickle. This resulted in Jews, who were fleeing the Nazis, being prohibited from admission to the United States during WWII.

Interestingly, the early 20th century restrictionists did not lobby against Mexican immigration because they saw Mexican workers as only temporary sojourners, easily deported when their work was no longer needed. Indeed, the Border Patrol was founded in the 1880s principally to keep banned Chinese immigrants from crossing into the United States from Mexico. During the Depression of the 1930s, however, thousands of Mexicans legally present in the United States were deported, especially those who participated in the large scale agricultural strikes in California. But once the United States entered World War II, Mexican workers were once again officially recruited through the "bracero" program to work in agriculture and war production.

Executive Order 9066 in 1942 called for the internment in prison camps of Japanese and Japanese Americans during World War II. This was the first time that American citizens were included in restrictive policies.

In the period following World War II, the movement for reform of the 1920s restrictive quotas began to gain strength. Refugees were allowed to enter the United States under the Displaced Persons Act of 1948. The 1952 McCarran-Walter Act set aside minimum annual quotas for all countries, opening the door to numerous nationalities previously kept out on racial grounds.

The report of President Truman's 1953 Immigration Commission, the election of John F. Kennedy as the first non-Protestant president, and the political climate created by the 1960s civil rights movement paved the way for the passage of the 1965 Immigration Act. This act ended the racial national origins quotas, opened up immigration from Asia and Southern and Eastern Europe, and set up the family and employment preference systems which (somewhat amended in later years) govern legal immigration today. The 1966 Cuban Adjustment Act offered Cubans who made it to U.S. shores automatic refugee status and legal permanent residence status after one year.

In 1980, Congress passed the Refugee Act to change U.S. refugee policy from an instrument of cold war diplomacy (allowing only for the resettlement of refugees from communism and the Middle East) to a system based on internationally-developed standards (allowing for the resettlement of any refugee fleeing persecution). The U.S. Administration, however, refused to recognize the validity of refugee and asylum claims from the thousands of Central Americans who fled conflicts funded by the U.S. government during that time period. This provoked a response from the American religious community whose humanitarian values created the Sanctuary movement, a massive civil disobedience campaign against immigration enforcement by hundreds of U.S. churches and synagogues.

In 1981, the Select Commission on Immigration and Refugee Policy (SCIRP) recommended amnesty for undocumented persons currently in the United States and sanctions against employers of future unauthorized workers. The Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA) was Congress' enactment of the SCIRP recommendations. More than 2 million long-time U.S. residents were given legal status under its provisions, and employers were required to check the immigration status of any new employees.

The Immigration Act of 1990 resulted in a comprehensive overhaul of the Immigration and Nationality Act (the basic immigration code of the United States). It altered the process for

legal immigration allowing for more diversity, increased the number of visas for legal immigration, set aside a number of visas for two years to allow family members of newly legalized immigrants to obtain permanent residence in the United States, and created a new legal status for humanitarian immigrants, "Temporary Protected Status."

The 1990s with its worsening economic conditions brought about an era of anti-immigrant sentiments throughout the country. The media picked up these sentiments and played them out through many negative stories about immigration. Legislators at all levels of government capitalized on these sentiments in their efforts to win elections. California was the first state to go as far as to pass a law (Proposition 187) that excluded all undocumented persons from accessing health and education services from the state. Portions of this law were later overturned by the Supreme Court.

In 1996, Congress passed the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act. The main purpose of the law was to prevent illegal immigration. However, the law also had an effect on legal immigration by requiring all persons seeking asylum to do so within one year of entering the country, allowing asylum seekers with false or no documents to be turned away at the border by a low-level immigration officer (summary exclusion), terminating benefits to immigrants who had not yet become citizens (some of them were reinstated in 1997 and others in 1998), requiring sponsors of immigrants to earn more than 125 percent of the poverty level, and deporting non-citizens (even permanent residents) who had committed a crime (with a sentence of a year or more) anytime since coming to the United States – even if they were only put on probation or had long ago served their time.

After September 11, 2001, there was increased suspicion that immigrants, especially persons from the Middle East, might be terrorists. Resulting legislation (the USA Patriot Act) and administrative policy changes led to things such as: increased border patrols; multi-layered security clearances of refugees accepted for resettlement in the United States; the questioning and finger-printing of young men from most Muslim countries who were not yet permanent residents, including the detention of some of them; and the creation of a new National Security Entry-Exit Registration System for all persons coming to the United States on temporary visas.

In 2002, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) was formed to combine several governmental offices, including the Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS). The functions of INS were split between three different bureaus within DHS, making security issues a primary factor in any immigration situation.

Over the last few years, the U.S. government has considered comprehensive immigration reform legislation to make it even harder for undocumented persons to enter the country, to create a mechanism whereby persons desiring jobs in the United States can access them legally, and allowing those undocumented already in the country to somehow, eventually obtain legal status. However, the strident voices of the anti-immigrant advocates have made it difficult to get any comprehensive legislation passed, and immigration has become a hot topic in political debates. In 2010, Arizona passed legislation allowing the police to stop and question anyone they suspect to be undocumented. Efforts continue to pressure Congress to pass immigration reform that would:

- Uphold family unity as a priority of all immigration policies;
- Create a process for undocumented immigrants to earn their legal status and eventual citizenship;
- Protect all workers and provide efficient channels of entry for new migrant workers;
- Facilitate immigrant integration;
- Restore due process protections and reform detention policies; and
- Align the enforcement of immigration laws with humanitarian values.

Our Immigrant Denomination

The foundation of our denomination was laid on the spirituality of immigrant Christians. It is usually mentioned only in passing, but three of the four “founding fathers” of our denomination (Thomas Campbell, Alexander Campbell, and Walter Scott), and many of their followers, were born in other countries and immigrated to the United States. The nature of our denomination was shaped by these people and their immigrant mentality and spirituality.

The nostalgia that all immigrants have for their homeland was redirected by our immigrant leaders into nostalgia for the restoration of the faith of the early church – “Where the scriptures speak we speak; where the scriptures are silent we are silent.” Each immigrant group brings its own culture and wants to keep it intact rather than adopting someone else’s culture. Our immigrant leaders redirected that desire for nonconformity into an understanding of the value of individual and congregational differences – “In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; in all things, charity.”

Today, the make-up of our denomination once again reflects immigrant roots. Among new Disciples’ congregations currently in formation, the majority are made up of Asian, African, Hispanic, and Haitian immigrants. The changing racial/ethnic make-up of the United States will continue to be reflected in the make-up of our denomination, if we are faithful to the gospel call. This will, hopefully, create opportunities for hospitality and openness within our church structures, rather than fear and judgmental attitudes that “they aren’t really Disciples.” It will challenge our leadership to find ways to more fully integrate diversity into the life of our denomination and to provide opportunities for these immigrants to grow into leadership positions.

Our Disciples’ Refugee & Immigration Ministries Program

The first recorded refugee family resettled by a Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) congregation was a Jewish family of four sponsored by First Christian Church in Eureka, Illinois, in 1941. They arrived from Germany through the American Friends Service Committee (prior to the Disciples establishing their own resettlement program). Dr. Salmon, the minister of the Eureka church, wrote: “It is and has been my conviction that this was one of the most important things that has happened in my entire ministry.” To read of a 2007 reunion between that family and the congregation see <http://www.disciplesworld.com/newsArticle.html?wsnID=11273>.

In 1949, the Disciples’ refugee program began when Ruth Milner was asked to administer the resettlement of “Displaced Persons” out of Europe in cooperation with Church World Service. Ella Williams Grimes assumed responsibility for the “Relief and Rehabilitation” program between October of 1954 and October of 1981, thus giving 27 years of dedicated service to refugees. Jennifer Riggs joined the staff during the large influx of Vietnamese and Cuban refugees in 1980. After Ella’s retirement in 1981, Jennifer became and continues to be the director of the program. At the end of 1981, the program was broadened to include more than refugee resettlement. Ministries to assist persons with immigration problems were added, and the name of the program was changed to “Refugee and Immigration Ministries” (RIM). Through the years, the Disciples’ refugee program, currently located in DHM (Disciples Home Missions), has received its major financial support from Week of Compassion.

Since the beginning of the program in 1949, more than 34,000 refugees have been helped to start a new life in the United States. The RIM program has helped process the paperwork for these individuals, but it has depended upon the faith and committed action of Disciples’ congregations to carry out this important ministry of “welcoming the stranger.”

Those welcomed included many persons from:

- In the 1950s – Bulgaria, Estonia, Germany, Holland, Hungary, Latvia, Poland, Ukraine, and Yugoslavia.

- In the 1960s – China, Cuba, Holland (Dutch Indonesians), and Yugoslavia.
- In the 1970s – Cambodia, Chile, Cuba, Iraq, Laos, Romania, Uganda, the USSR, and Vietnam.
- In the 1980s – Afghanistan, Cambodia, Cuba, Ethiopia, Haiti, Iraq, Iran, Laos, Poland, Romania, the USSR, and Vietnam.
- In the 1990s – Afghanistan, Bosnia, Cuba, Ethiopia, Haiti, Iraq, Iran, Kosovo, Laos, Liberia, Romania, Somalia, the Sudan, the Former USSR, and Vietnam.
- In the 2000s – Afghanistan, Bosnia, Burma, Burundi, Colombia, Croatia, Cuba, Democratic Republic of Congo, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Iran, Iraq, Liberia, North Korea, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, the Former USSR, and Vietnam.

From the beginning efforts to support congregations assisting immigrants the immigration component of the program has expanded to include support of the Southwest Good Samaritan Ministries on the Texas/Mexico border, education of congregations on immigration issues, theological reflection on immigration, and advocacy for immigration reform.

(Updated 2010)