

NO. 0729
(SENSE-OF-THE-ASSEMBLY)
FAITH AND OUR NEW NEIGHBORS

A Brief History

Canada and the United States are immigrant nations formed out of persons migrating to find a better life. Until the 19th century, there were no restrictions on immigration to our two countries, and people came and contributed their labor and skills to help our nations thrive. Labor was needed for mining, agriculture, industry, western expansion, and to help our great cities flourish. Our nations have depended on newly arrived immigrants for their development.

Historically, the words on the Statue of Liberty have been a symbol of the welcome that the United States extended to immigrants. Those words expressed not only the need of Europeans to immigrate, but also the United States' desire to use Europeans' energy and talents. In Canada, there was relatively free immigration throughout the British Commonwealth until the 1960s, and Canada received immigrants from many other Commonwealth countries.

As immigration to both countries became more ethnically and racially diverse, anti-immigrant forces surfaced, and various immigration restrictions were imposed on new immigrants. Discriminatory laws were passed, fundamental rights were violated, mob violence erupted, and immigrants were locked up in inhumane conditions.

The 21st century has brought new demands for even more immigrant workers to work in the agriculture, construction, slaughterhouse, janitorial, hotel, and restaurant industries. Immigrants are willing to work in jobs that many U.S. and Canadian citizens reject. While our economies depend on the labor of these immigrants, we often tend to be very critical of the immigrants that come for these employment opportunities, especially those who come to our countries without proper documentation or who overstay their temporary visas.

Disciples are an immigrant denomination, having been formed by and for immigrants on the frontier and growing in size, in recent years, through the addition of immigrant congregations. Throughout our history, Disciples have had specific ministries of welcome to immigrants coming to the United States and Canada. That ministry has been carried out by congregations, regions, and general ministries. For about 25 years, the Disciples, in cooperation with other denominations through Church World Service, have also funded a full-time staff person in Washington, DC, to work on making U.S. immigration legislation and regulations more hospitable to immigrants.

Guidance from Scripture

The Bible is a story of God's intimate involvement with people as they live out their history. It is a story of movement and change as people and nations grow, mix, and take on various characteristics. It is a story of constantly renewed hopes for a better future. Yet, it is a story of God intervening and sending people out in new directions when life begins to look too settled, too full of routine, too full of pleasures, or too weighed down by sin. Hebrews 11 reviews the

changes in direction experienced by the Hebrew people and affirms the people of God as "strangers and exiles on earth."

In the Bible, the presence of a stranger is seen as an opportunity for hospitality – the sharing of one's home and resources. Over and over, we find stories of strangers being welcomed. Abraham welcomed the strangers by the Oaks of Mamre who turned out to be messengers from God who blessed him with the promise of a son. From the time of the exodus, God continually reminded the people that they should care for the stranger with justice and compassion, because they were once strangers in Egypt. Sojourners, at times, stayed for months or even years. Moses and Jacob are examples who contributed their labor to their hosts, and each found a wife in their host's family. God commanded the Israelites to set aside cities of refuge in Canaan as places of asylum for those who fled from persons seeking to kill them. The widow of Zarephath welcomed Elijah into her home when she had only one meal to offer, but God filled her pantry as fast as it was emptied and Elijah remained for many days. The foreigner Ruth was generously welcomed by Boaz, Naomi's kinsman.

Mary, Joseph, and Jesus found safety in Egypt where they fled to escape the slaughter of the innocents. When Jesus sent out his disciples to teach and heal in his name, he instructed them to take little with them and trust in the hospitality of those they would meet along the way. In the story of the Good Samaritan we see that it is the stranger in the land (the Samaritan) who comes to the rescue of the man beside the road. When Jesus described the last judgment, there was explicit identification of Jesus with the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the prisoner, and the sick. It was in responding to such persons, the disciples were told, that they would know they were responding to Jesus. On the road to Emmaus the hospitality of the disciples resulted in Jesus making himself known to them in the breaking of bread.

As people of faith we are constantly reminded to welcome the stranger and trust the outcome to God. It is in living out this faith commitment that we engage in generosity to strangers and immigrants with the confidence that God will take care of our needs.

WHEREAS, immigration has played a major role in the development of our countries and the advancement of our economies; and

WHEREAS, immigration is often a desperate means of survival forced on people by poverty or persecution; and

WHEREAS, Canada and the United States are rich nations in comparison to many other countries around the world, whose citizens are seeking a better life; and

WHEREAS, scripture shows us that we are all neighbors in this world, who are called to reach out in hospitality to each other; and

WHEREAS, many of our new Disciples congregations are immigrant churches; and

WHEREAS, the United States is currently engaged in a political struggle over proposed immigration reform legislation; and

WHEREAS, immigrants cannot put their needs on hold until just, humane and compassionate legislation is passed;

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the General Assembly calls upon all Disciples members, congregations, regions, and general ministries to, from a faith perspective with intentionality:

- 1.) Reflect on current immigration issues;
- 2.) Embrace and form relationships with immigrants, especially Disciples immigrant congregations;
- 3.) Advocate immigration reform legislation that is just, humane and compassionate; and
- 4.) Provide hospitality that meets the needs of our immigrant neighbors in the areas of food, clothing, housing, healthcare, education, employment, legal assistance, and refuge; and

THEREFORE, BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the General Assembly affirms its support of the daily efforts to welcome our new neighbors that are taking place in many congregations and regions and by the Southwest Good Samaritan Ministries in Texas, Humane Borders in Arizona, the Central Pastoral Office for Hispanic Ministries, the Office of North American Pacific/Asian Disciples, the New Church Ministry Team of Church Extension, and Refugee and Immigration Ministries of Disciples Home Missions.

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The General Board recommends that the General Assembly
ADOPT Business Item No. 0729. (Debate time 12 minutes).