

Mennonite Church USA Churchwide Statement on Immigration

Introduction

Mennonite Church USA has roots in seventeenth-century churches planted by immigrants from Europe. Our church continues to grow and be enlivened by immigrants who join us from many countries. As Christians, we believe we are called to welcome these sojourners in our congregations and communities, especially as our government creates increasingly harsh immigration laws in the name of fighting terrorism. Assumptions about identity make some people more vulnerable to political biases and discrimination than others. Our concerns about the status of immigrants in this country relate to how people are treated based on race, nationality, ethnicity, and religious identity. *We reject our country's mistreatment of immigrants, repent of our silence, and commit ourselves to act with and on behalf of our immigrant brothers and sisters, regardless of their legal status.*

Biblical Background

The Bible offers us some valuable insights about welcoming strangers, and in our context immigrants are viewed as strangers. "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..." (Leviticus 19:33, 34). We affirm that God has called us to welcome immigrants, because all of us are sojourners (Exodus 23:9, Deuteronomy 24:17, 18). We believe that when we welcome strangers, we welcome Jesus (Matthew 25:35).

Immigrants in the United States

We may not realize it, but our nation depends economically and culturally on the contributions of immigrants. Immigrant entrepreneurs, professionals, and artists contribute to the United States' wealth and diverse culture. Immigrant laborers often work the least desirable jobs.

For many immigrants, however, the opportunities of living in the United States are offset by hardship and discrimination. They work the most difficult and dangerous jobs for the lowest pay, and immigrants without documents are frequently cheated out of wages and denied compensation for work-related injuries. Unfair immigration policies make it difficult to travel across borders, unjust quota systems discriminate against citizens from some countries, and families are divided by long delays in document processing. Immigrants in poverty are denied most welfare and healthcare benefits. Because our society tells us to fear some immigrants more than others, an increasingly militarized U.S./Mexico border has led to reports of abuse by border guards and hundreds of deaths in the desert.¹

Since September 11, 2001, the Bush Administration, with the support of others in the government, has issued new policies and enforced old laws that strike fear in the hearts of immigrant communities, creating the perception that any contact with government officials or social service agencies might result in arrest or deportation. Middle Eastern males across the United States are being forced to register and are deported if their papers are not in order. Haitians and other Caribbean peoples arriving by boat are being detained without regard for their civil rights and deported even when they have credible fear of persecution at home. The new Department of Homeland

¹The Mexico Foreign Relations Office records 1870 deaths from 1995-2001. (There are no statistics for Arizona or Texas until 1996. The U.S. Border Patrol did not begin keeping comprehensive migrant death statistics until FY 1998.)

Security, whose stated mission is to guard the nation against terrorists, now handles immigration and refugee enforcement and services. Our government's policies lead us to view these strangers as a threat to our safety and economic security.

Immigrants in our congregations

Immigrants—documented and undocumented—are members of many Mennonite Church USA congregations. Immigrant churches face a society whose policies and practices discriminate against immigrants and people of color. Immigrant churches with undocumented members are deeply affected by the poverty and fear experienced by many members of their communities; often churches share the costs of food, shelter, and clothing, assist in job searches, and support families when members are deported. Undocumented church leaders are often unable or afraid to travel to larger church gatherings without identification. Congregations without immigrant members are finding their communities changed by immigration and are struggling with how to respond.

Our commitment

We affirm individuals and churches that are already working against poverty and fear in immigrant communities. We affirm those who are speaking to the government about our nation's unjust immigration policies. We affirm the church's work with anti-racism, while we acknowledge that much more work remains. We also affirm the church's support of agencies that are addressing the roots of international inequality, which cause people to emigrate. However, we understand that because the United States controls more material resources than any other country, people will continue to immigrate here in search of economic and political stability. Because of our nation's abundance, because God has called us to welcome the sojourner, and because of the richness that immigrants bring to the Mennonite Church USA, we commit ourselves to action with and on behalf of our immigrant brothers and sisters.

We invite Mennonite Church USA congregations to consider the following actions (resources listed below):

1. Build relationships with newcomers in our communities. Facilitate the mutual sharing of immigrants' stories and contributions in our churches and neighborhoods.
2. Plan congregational learning tours in our communities,

- including immigrant neighborhoods, churches, and workplaces, as well as government offices that serve immigrants.
3. Partner with immigrant congregations to plan church services or community events.
4. Offer church facilities and volunteers for documentation services, English classes, ethnic celebrations, or other outreach programs.
5. Engage in mutual aid to offer food, shelter, clothing, and other resources to undocumented and documented immigrants.
6. Learn about issues affecting immigrants by reading newspapers or magazines, joining national immigration rights organizations, or contacting church agencies that work with immigration issues.
7. Join study tours to the U.S./Mexico border, refugee camps, or detention centers to learn more about U.S. immigration and refugee policies.
8. Advocate for just and humane policies for immigrants and refugees by contacting local, state, and national elected officials.

These groups helped write and support this resolution:

- Iglesia Menonita Hispana: Marco Guete, moderator; and Juan Montes, director
- MCC US: Jose Ortiz, executive director; Rebeca Jimenez Yoder, immigration education and advocacy director; Bethany Spicher, Washington Office legislative assistant for domestic affairs; Felipe Hinojosa, MCC Central States staff associate
- Executive Board Office of Cross Cultural Relations, Kenyetta Aduma, director
- Executive Board Directors Office, Susan Mark Landis, peace advocate
- Pacific Southwest Conference, Jeff Wright, conference minister, southern California
- PSMC/CAL Mission Team and the PSMC Pastoral Leadership Committee
- MultiEthnic Ministries, Mennonite Mission Network: Kuaying Teng, minister
- Mission Association Center for Anabaptist Leadership: Rev. Femi Fatunmbi
- Mennonite Church USA Executive Board Executive Board
- Mennonite Church USA Constituency Leaders Council

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For additional resources: www.mennoniteusa.org/peace.

"However, during the Bush Administration a fairly systematic pattern of increased rights abuses on the part of Border Patrol and other INS agents emerged more plainly from a diverse and much more-expanded body of evidence. This information was reported by human rights groups, the press, congressional committees, the Mexican government, Mexican academic researchers, and even the U.S. Department of Justice. Recorded offenses included beatings, shootings and inappropriate use of firearms, sexual assault, destruction of property, denial of due process, verbal abuse and harassment, inappropriate and illegal searches, substandard detention conditions, and reckless high-speed chases." The militarization of the US-Mexico Border by Timothy J. Dunn