
CHRISTIAN LIFE COMMITTEE

Official Report

It would be difficult to overstate the significance of immigration as a subject of public discourse in the United States today. Border policy remains a hotly contested issue throughout American politics, the legal standing of immigrants across diverse circumstances has fallen under intense scrutiny, and the exact extent of the government's authority, as well as the predictability of the legal processes involved in these matters, appears markedly unclear. While ignorance of these realities has been a luxury for many, that naivete is quickly eroding – especially for those who know immigrants as friends or family and are accustomed to the precarious nature of their situations.

The purpose of this report is to offer churches and individuals in the BGAV simple guidance as we seek to bear witness to Christ within these complexities. Without reservation or qualification: our presiding assumption as a Committee is the love of God and the love of neighbor (Matthew 22:37-29) – mandates which hold fast in our dealings with all people, regardless of who they are, where they reside, or where they were born. For us who were once foreigners and strangers but have since been made members of God's household, the possibility that everyone can be brought near by the blood of Christ demands that we ultimately submit our behavior to the compassion of God's Kingdom over and against any merely-secular assessment of citizenship (Ephesians 2:13, 19).

In fact, scripture makes it plain that the love to which we are commanded arises out of a fundamental identity with the predicament of immigrants. In Deuteronomy 10:18-19, Moses reminds Israel of this very thing: *He – God – defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing. And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt.* Because God loves the foreigner and commands us to do the same, it is essential for the BGAV to consider what shape this love must now take in the current moment, and to resist whatever pressures are mounting to resist it – whether they are conditions of the state (e.g. the criteria for deportation, prerequisites for acquiring work permits, etc.) or conditions of the heart (e.g. racism or xenophobia).

Who are immigrants?

The word “immigrant” can refer to people within a variety of situations, and so it is important to understand exactly who is described by the term and how these individuals may or may not fit into the cultural assumptions we draw about their lives and their families. Technically speaking, an immigrant is any person who is permanently residing within a nation in which they were not born. Legally speaking, however, the United States defines an “immigrant” as anyone included within a set of diverse categories,¹ including naturalized citizens, permanent residents, refugees or asylees, those with “twilight status,” and those without legal status to reside in the country – referred to frequently as “undocumented” or “illegal.” Strictly speaking, international students are not typically considered immigrants due to their express intention to return home upon completing their studies. Practically, however, these students face many of the same challenges and have recently, for these reasons, come under additional scrutiny.

The legal nature of immigrants in these categories is not only complicated but also subject to constant reevaluation and change. Those seeking to make the United States their home are often facing steep challenges: not just learning curves pertaining to the language and culture, or the procedures of the law, but extended periods of uncertainty as they wait for certain confirmations or assurances – many years, in some cases. There is a pervasive myth amongst many born in the United States that anyone who desires to emigrate to the US can do so through official channels so long as they remain persistent, patient, and compliant – but that supposed meritocracy simply does not exist. In reality, not everyone is eligible to attain a visa to reside or work in America nor is it possible to simply choose to become an American citizen through a tedious but ultimately accessible process. Many who long for a “better life” among us simply do not qualify for any extant legal pathway – leaving the “American Dream” of the early 20th century largely unattainable.

Historically speaking, it may also be worthwhile to consider the role that coerced immigration has had in shaping our nation's current demographics – especially as that involves the African American community and the plight of chattel slavery. If there is a deep-seated misconception about just how accessible the United States is for well-meaning, law-

¹ Migration Policy Institute provides these categories in their own ‘explainer’ document, *Who Is An Immigrant?* <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/Explainer-WhoIsAnImmigrant-PRINT-Final.pdf>

abiding aspiring immigrants, there is an analogous misconception regarding the systemic effects of forced immigration through the Atlantic slave trade that took place for over three centuries. These effects are still felt today.

Here in Virginia specifically, immigrant populations have been growing. The number of immigrants in our state has increased from 5% of the population in 1990 to 13.5% in 2023. Estimates vary but the number of those immigrants who are in the state illegally ranges from 250 to 275 thousand persons – around 3% of the total population. Notably, two thirds of all immigrants in the commonwealth reside in Northern Virginia.

What does the Bible say about immigrants?

Let us not forget that the Christian Church is the largest multi-cultural and multi-lingual movement in the history of the world. No other religion or nation comes close. But this reality arises not from technical definitions set in place by legislatures or executives, but by a theological conviction in the Kingdom of God and its transcendence over and against all secular borders and national allegiances. Furthermore, the Bible speaks often about the plight of the immigrant and God's mercy in providing materially, socially, and spiritually for their needs. In light of these realities, therefore, our Committee finds it necessary to remind the BGAV of some of the more significant and relevant Biblical teachings on this topic:

1. Acts 17:26-28 (NIV)

"From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'"

When Paul seeks a foothold for the gospel amongst the elites of Athens atop the Areopagus, his strategy includes an uncompromising assertion in the common origin of all people – and it is precisely this common humanity that Paul then uses to comfort and assure the Greeks that God, who is also the Lord of the Hebrews, remains accessible and knowable to them. Here and in other passages (e.g. the "image of God" in Genesis 1:27) we see a clear scriptural polemic against all identitarian and nationalistic claims that would limit God's work to a particular people. Just as God tells Abraham at the beginning of Israel's story, the plan all along has been for the blessing of God to extend "to the nations" (Genesis 12:3).

2. 1 Corinthians 9:20-22

To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like the one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like the one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some.

Paul's evangelistic "strategy" not only includes making a deliberate decision to re-adopt his own identity as a Jew, but his choice to place himself within the shoes of the Greek in order to share the gospel as needed. Similarly as Christians, therefore, we are not afforded any luxury of resisting solidarity. In our dealings with immigrants – regardless of their status – our priority must be to inhabit their position as best we can in order to minister to them through the gospel. We trust God to curate our opportunities as his followers, and those he places within our reach become our responsibility.

3. Mark 12:29-31 (NIV)

"The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."

When Jesus is asked to identify the most important command in Israel's Law, he does not provide a single answer but refers both to the love of God and to the love of neighbor. Lest we be tempted to sidestep the later, as many who heard Jesus' teaching were themselves, Christ's response to the expert of the law in Luke 10 (the Parable of the Good Samaritan) not only assures us of our obligations to love those we consider to be enemies, but more pointedly, our obligations to extend love beyond our own cultural and ethnic communities – i.e., to the foreigner turned neighbor amongst us – perhaps even as a result of immigration.

4. Leviticus 19:33-35 (NIV)

‘When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. 34 The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the Lord your God.’

The mandate that immigrants be treated as those who are “native born” is as strong a statement against nativism and xenophobia as could be imagined. For good reason, the Hebrews were tempted, just as are we when reading their history in the Old Testament, to understand themselves as uniquely and eternally privileged. This stoked a disposition within them to resist foreigners and refrain from showing compassion. But here in Leviticus, God reinterprets their origin story in Egypt as, not just a story about God’s unique provision for them as a nation, but ample motivation to care for others who have experienced what they once endured. God’s people are essentially immigrants – and he reminds them frequently of this fact. For this reason, our compassion is appropriate.

5. Deuteronomy 10:18-19 (NIV)

He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing. And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt.

If it is true that God has instructed the church to care for the sojourner and immigrant within it, Deuteronomy reminds us that this is not merely a command God institutes, but an example he sets. Ultimately, as we know, we love because God has first loved us (1 John 4:19) – and in this passage, the “foreigners residing among [us]” are the definitive objects of that love. God himself is their defender. If they receive the material provision they need – even at our hands – it is to his credit alone. Some may be familiar with a certain “preferential option for the poor,” in which God assures the poor of his unique care. The same could be said of the foreigner; that there is, at the same time perhaps, a “preferential option for the immigrant.”

6. Numbers 15:15-16 (NIV)

The community is to have the same rules for you and for the foreigner residing among you; this is a lasting ordinance for the generations to come. You and the foreigner shall be the same before the Lord: The same laws and regulations will apply both to you and to the foreigner residing among you.”

Not only are immigrants amongst the Hebrews assured of God’s love, but they are also to receive a kind of equal protection under the law. Given the story thus far in the Old Testament, it is a remarkable statement to read that the Hebrew and the foreigner should abide by the same rules (“laws and regulations”) – and moreover, should exist as “the same before the Lord.” There may be political implications here for the state – but those extend beyond the purview of this report. Instead, it is simply notable to mention that immigrants are elevated to the status of God’s people – without condition – as a result of God’s perspective; he shows no partiality (Romans 2:11).

7. Deuteronomy 27:19 (NIV)

Cursed is anyone who withholds justice from the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow. Then all the people shall say, “Amen!”

Similar to the previous passages, we are here assured that punishment accompanies the mistreatment of immigrants. God’s instructions to the Hebrews are not toothless – and because of his love for them, his instructions are not simply suggestions, but requirements punishable by his “curse.” As a Committee, we recognize that issues related to legality burden our interactions with immigrants and make discerning our response to their situations more complicated. But we should be assured that all people among us – foreigner included – deserve justice and that God’s retribution awaits those who “withhold” this justice from anyone.

8. 1 Peter 1:1

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to God’s elect, exiles scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia.

This greeting out of Peter’s first letter only goes to describe the reality of the early church and its self-understanding in relation to the regions and municipalities it inhabited. Like the Hebrews, the Church has been a people scattered across the world – exiled in its own kind of diaspora; not due to persecution alone, but due

to the very nature of the gospel as it comes to incorporate the body of Christ across borders and languages, etc. To be a part of the church is to exist within a global family, and our allegiance to one another and to God far outweighs any of the particular identities we may carry as legal citizens (or “undocumented” residents).

Most of the public and political discussions around immigration have focused on the “legal” or “illegal status” of individual persons. Again, these legal parameters are complex and in constant flux, even if governed with the best of intentions. But as citizens of heaven (Philippians 3:20-31), it is paramount that we as the church neither burden ourselves with the unique responsibilities of the state (maintaining order, securing a border, establishing policy, etc.) nor allow the state unilateral authority to dictate our behavior in relation to other people. In fact, receiving scripture as the sole authoritative rule of life frees the Church to respond to immigration with renewed consistency and compassion, even when the policies of governments, and the resulting legal and political circumstances of immigrants, change unexpectedly. It is simply not incumbent upon the church to support, maintain, or police certain immigration policies. Rather, the kind of submission the Bible requires involves choosing to pursue justice, for the sake of love, for anyone and everyone we encounter – anyone God understands as our “neighbor.”

What are some basic steps we can take to obey the calling we see in scripture?

It is all too easy to avoid action altogether when an issue as confusing as “immigration” comes into view – to be paralyzed or even apathetic. But the Church must act and do something if it is to minister in Jesus’ name as he intends. Knowing just how complicated an issue like immigration can be, our Committee would like to make the following suggestions as individuals and congregations within the BGAV seek to bear witness to Jesus in their unique contexts:

1. *Understand the legal parameters around your role as an advocate and the status of immigrants you may be trying to help.* Spend time researching what is allowed, what is prohibited, and what options may be afforded to you and your neighbor. Consider the following online resources as you learn:

- “Red Cards/Tarjetas Rojas,” from the Immigrant Legal Resource Center (ILRC)²
- “Immigration Enforcement Action: What Churches Need to Know,” by Heather Kimmel³
- “What to do if ICE Comes to Your Church,” by Sarah Einselen⁴
- “Sanctuary Congregations and Harboring FAQ,” by the ACLU⁵
- “What To Do if Immigration Approaches, Arrests, or Detains You,” by the National Immigration Law Center⁶

2. *Brief those in your congregation on basic protocols surrounding your church’s cooperation with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officials.* In short, ICE has the legal authority to enter the “public” spaces of your church campus and make arrests should they have a valid warrant or “probable cause.” They may only enter “private” spaces using a judicial warrant signed by a judge (an administrative warrant does not grant them that access). Furthermore, no one is required to cooperate with ICE or to answer questions. There are very few examples of ICE actually coming to a church.

3. *Seek to better understand your unique, local situation.* Get to know the immigrants in your own community, personally. Exegete your context down to the level of individuals. Make any changes to your church’s life and ministry that might make the congregation more accessible and permeable to immigrant communities. Your church can easily become a source of information for families in need and while information alone may not always be enough – or may even, at times, justify inaction – providing education about the complexity of the system is a great place to begin. Also consider starting ministries directed specifically to those individuals – e.g. ESL, Exchange Student Bible Studies and hosting programs, etc. The impact of Christian witness on international students can be profound and when some of

² <https://www.ilrc.org/red-cards-tarjetas-rojas>

³ https://www.ucc.org/immigration-enforcement-action-what-churches-need-to-know/?utm_source=facebook&utm_medium=social&utm_term=united-church-of-christ&utm_content=b6128e33-3f86-4c39-93c1-fb8f643b6f49&utm_campaign=social-media

⁴ <https://sojo.net/articles/news/what-do-if-ice-comes-your-church>

⁵ <https://www.aclu.org/documents/sanctuary-congregations-and-harboring-faq>

⁶ <https://www.nilc.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/KYR-What-To-Do-if-Immigration-Approaches-Arrests-or-Detains-You-Eng.pdf>

these students seek to remain in the US and change their status, American friends, churches and other organizations – when called upon to support this change – should be willing to do so. Continue your brainstorming here:

- “Immigrant Welcoming Congregations,” The United Church of Christ⁷

What do we do now?

Our Committee is painfully aware of the insufficiency of a report like this in addressing every moral dilemma or explaining every procedural complexity. But in an effort to encourage future action, we would suggest working through the following questions as individuals and as churches:

Reflect on these questions as individuals:

- Are you close friends with any immigrants or international students? If not, have you taken full advantage of the opportunities you have to do so? Have you ever invited an immigrant into your home? Who has God allowed to cross your path recently?
- In Matthew 28, with Jesus’ teaching on the Sheep and the Goats, we are told to expect Jesus’ presence amongst the poor and marginalized. When you think of the immigrants around you – do you see Jesus in them? Are you cognizant of, not just the responsibility to minister in his name, but the opportunity to commune with him when you do?
- Are you personally struggling with the complexities of ministering to immigrants? If you are – does that struggle end in apathy or action? If you aren’t – have you too quickly resolved the complexities around your own ethical obligations as a Christian?
- How deliberately have you sought to develop sympathy for the plight of immigrants? Have you allowed prejudice and paranoia to create suspicion, or have you intentionally cultivated love and mercy?

Reflect on these questions as a congregation:

- What needs to change in our church in order to reach and share the gospel with immigrant communities in our context? What opportunities for the Kingdom are we not yet availing ourselves of?
- What church policies and procedures need to be reevaluated or reiterated given the current political conversations about immigration occurring in our country? How can we ensure that our church is an accessible and safe space for immigrant families?
- How can we build support and enthusiasm within our congregation for programs that support and minister to immigrants (e.g. ESOL, counseling, even friendship)?
- What needs do the immigrants around your church face? What local partnerships ought we to seek out as a congregation in order to better care for the immigrant population around us?

Conclusion

Although, the political discourse surrounding immigration remains divisive, the fundamental commands we have received from Jesus remain unwaveringly clear. And so it seems evident to the Committee that the category of “immigrant” or “foreigner” is implicated directly in Christ’s instruction: because the immigrants who live among us are also our neighbors, we must love them as we love ourselves.

This simple observation may not solve every moral dilemma or yield every innovative strategy that obedience to Christ in these days will require, but it is more than capable of providing the Church with direction for our hearts and minds. So may the God who took on the flesh of a human being for our sakes – and not only that, but the flesh of an infant refugee (Matthew 2:14) – provide us the rich reserves of stamina, clarity, and creativity necessary to love as he loved first.

⁷ <https://www.ucc.org/what-we-do/wider-church-ministries/global-hope/refugee-and-migration-ministries/immigrant-welcoming-congregations/>

Respectfully submitted,

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