

Immigration Reform

A Policy Statement for the Kentucky Council of Churches

Adopted by the delegates of the 59th Annual Assembly of the Kentucky Council of Churches in Bardstown, KY on October 20, 2006

The Kentucky Council of Churches, acting in its 59th Annual Assembly, wishes to engage the issue of immigration reform with the goal of encouraging an immigration system that facilitates legal status and family unity in the interest of serving the God-given dignity and human rights of every individual. It is our collective prayer that current and future public and legislative debates will produce a just immigration system of which our nation and immigrants can be proud. Every opportunity to reform the immigration policy of United States should be taken, and all policy should be reformed justly.

Congress is now considering legislation to respond to thousands who seek to enter the United States to improve their lives and the lives of their families, as well as those several million workers who remain in our country without legal status. As children of God, we are called to seek and serve God in all persons. As Christians, we are called to remember the biblical mandate to extend hospitality to the stranger.

Scriptural Foundations

And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? How do you read?" And he answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." And he said to him, "You have answered right; do this, and you will live." But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him, and departed, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was; and when he saw him, he had compassion, and went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine; then he set him on his own beast and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, 'Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.' Which of these three, do you think, proved neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed mercy on him." And Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise." [Luke 10:25-37]

"[Lord,] when did we see you a stranger and invite you in? ..." The King will reply, "I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me." [Matthew 25: 38, 40]

"Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares." [Hebrews 13:2]

"You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry, my wrath will burn." [Exodus 21-23]

"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." [Galatians 3:28]

"For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." [Deuteronomy 10:17-19]

"...you are no longer strangers and sojourners but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God." [Ephesians 2:11-21]

"When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God." [Leviticus 19:33-34]

"When you beat your olive tree, you are not to go back over the branches again; the olives that are left will be for the foreigner, the orphan and the widow. When you gather the grapes from your vineyard, you are not to return and pick grapes a second time; what is left will be for the foreigner, the orphan and the widow." [Deuteronomy 24:20-21]

"When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor and for the alien: I am the Lord your God." [Leviticus 23:22]

Then Boaz said to Ruth, "Now listen, my daughter, do not go to glean in another field or leave this one, but keep close to my young women. Keep your eyes on the field that is being reaped, and follow behind them. I have ordered the young men not to bother you. If you get thirsty, go to the vessels and drink from what the young men have drawn." Then she fell prostrate, with her face to the ground, and said to him, "Why have I found favor in your sight, that you should take notice of me, when I am a foreigner?" But Boaz answered her, "May you have a full reward from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge!" Then she said, "May I continue to find favor in your sight, my lord, for you have comforted me and spoken kindly to your servant, even though I am not one of your servants." When she got up to glean, Boaz instructed his young men, "Let her glean even among the standing sheaves, and do not reproach her. You must also pull out some handfuls for her from the bundles, and leave them for her to glean, and do not rebuke her." [Ruth 8-16]

The example of care for others is demonstrated repeatedly throughout the Bible. *"Likewise when a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, comes from a distant land because of your name prays toward this house, then hear in heaven your dwelling place, and do according to all that the foreigner calls to you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name."* [1Kings 8:41-43]

"For this community there will be the same law for you as for the foreigner living with you; this is a permanent regulation through all your generations; the foreigner is to be treated the same way before ADONAI as yourselves." [Numbers 15:15]

"You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the Lord your God." [Leviticus 19:10]

"A curse on anyone who interferes with justice for the foreigner, orphan or widow. 'All the

people are to say, 'Amen!'" [Deuteronomy 27:11]

"I will draw near to you for judgment; I will be swift to bear witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow and the orphan, against those who rob the foreigner of his rights, and do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts. For I the Lord do not change;" [Malachi 3:5-6]

As a Council of Churches, we wish to focus upon the moral dimensions of public policy and encourage the pursuit of policies that uphold the human dignity of each person, all of whom are made in the image of God.

Migrant Workers' Needs

According to The Council of State Governments' (CSG) Executive Committee Resolution on Federal Job Training for Migrant and Seasonal Farm Workers (2003), over 3 million people earn their living as migrant or seasonal farm workers in the United States. Of those workers, the vast majority is Hispanic with Mexican origin or heritage, and Kentucky is consistent with this national trend (Ibarra, 2000). Migrant workers have entered Kentucky to harvest tobacco, work at thoroughbred farms, and take service jobs at restaurants, hotels and other service establishments. The state estimates that 70 percent to 80 percent of the farm workers in Kentucky are Hispanic.

In Kentucky, as in many states, the number of Hispanic migrant farm workers has increased dramatically in the past decade (Poynter, 1999a, b; Rural Migrant News, 2004). According to the Kentucky School Boards Association (2004), "the Latino population has doubled over the last three years, with 99 percent of the migrant population in Fayette County [Kentucky] being Mexican" (p. 2). Further, in 2004 the Kentucky School Boards Association reported, "the last numbers...[indicate] Hispanic migrant students made up 22 percent of the migrant population. Five years ago, that would have been less than 1 percent" (p. 1).

The National Center for Farmworker Health (1995) has recognized farm work as one of the most dangerous occupations in the United States, ranked second only to mining in terms of occupational hazard. More recently, U.S. Department of Labor statistics have indicated that agricultural workers experience the highest rate of employee fatality and injury of any workers in the country (Moreno, 2004). Some of the most common farm work related injuries include back injuries, loss of limbs, heat stress, dehydration, dermatitis, eye problems, and pesticide poisoning, which can result in severe disabilities. A significant percentage of the agricultural workforce in the United States is comprised of migrant and seasonal farm workers, most of whom are immigrants of Latin American origin (U.S. Department of Labor, 2004). The occurrence of work-related disabilities among farm workers, including migrant farm workers, is substantial (National Center for Farmworker Health).

The Need for Effective Ministry Efforts

Churches should encourage efforts to provide a comprehensive network of social services and advocacy for migrant families. Church members can assist individuals and families in navigating the arduous immigration process and can stand to defend to rights of migrants, especially those in detention. We can stand in solidarity with our migrant brothers and sisters and minister to them so that their journeys will truly be journeys of hope, not of despair, and so

that, at their point of arrival, they will experience that they are strangers no longer, and instead, members of God's household.

Effectively identifying and serving members of the Hispanic migrant worker population depends on an informed, collaborative approach among church members, outreach workers, rehabilitation counselors, and community service providers. All who attempt to minister to migrant workers should have a grasp of multicultural aspects of such work including training that encompasses stereotyping, prejudice, and social roles, as well as the processes of acculturation and adaptation (Smart & Smart, 1996). Church members must understand the norms and cultural values of populations they wish to help-- paying specific attention to the role of family, respect for others, communication practices, and commitment to keeping one's word.

The Need for Global Anti-Poverty Efforts

Many migrants are compelled to leave their homes out of economic necessity in order to provide even the most basic needs for themselves and their families. Members of the Kentucky Council of Churches call for international efforts designed to create conditions in which people do not have to leave their homes out of necessity. Trade, international economic aid, debt relief, and other types of economic policies should be pursued that result in people not having to migrate in desperation in order to survive. Legislation that deals with border protection should also be consistent with humanitarian values and with the need to treat all individuals with respect.

The Need for Familial Reunification

US citizens and legal permanent residents must endure many years of separation from close family members who they want to join them in the United States. The backlogs of available visas for family members often results in waits of more than fifteen years. More visas should be made available for family reunification purposes and the pending backlogs should be reduced.

The Need for Broad-Based Legalization Opportunities

For those who are already in this country without proper immigration documentation, opportunities should be provided for them to obtain legalization if they demonstrate good moral character and have built up equities in this country. Such an earned legalization should be achievable and independently verifiable.

The Need for Due Process

In recent years, immigrants have been subject to laws and policies that debase our country's fundamental commitment to individual liberties and due process. Asylum seekers are currently being made to meet a very high bar for demonstrating their claim for asylum, and are incarcerated in the meantime. Detention for months without charges, secret hearings, ethnic profiling, and other policies are not consistent with biblical and church teaching about how immigrants should be treated. The United States is a nation with a long, rich tradition of welcoming newcomers. Government policies that identify immigration with terrorism damage our standing abroad, tarnish our heritage, and do not make us safer.

The Need for a Temporary Worker Program

We must also acknowledge that the Kentucky and U.S. economies currently depend upon the labor provided by migrants. Therefore, many migrants come to this country to fill jobs. We need a more humane system by which laborers from other countries can enter the US legally to fill positions in the labor force. A temporary worker program should include: a path to permanent residency which is achievable and verifiable, family unity which allows immediate family members to join the worker, job portability which allows workers to change employers, the labor protections that apply to US workers, enforcement mechanisms and resources to enforce workers' rights, wages and benefits which do not undercut domestic workers, mobility between US and homeland and within the US, and labor market testing to ensure US workers are not harmed.

Therefore be it resolved that

the Kentucky Council of Churches encourages all our member communions and congregations to strive for legislative and other solutions that accomplish:

- a) a broad-based legalization of the undocumented;
- b) a temporary worker program with appropriate protections for both U.S. and foreign workers;
- c) changes to the immigration system to address the grounds of admissibility, petition processing, caps on visas, and admission bars and waivers;
- d) restoration of due process for immigrants,
- e) wages and benefits in compliance with US labor laws,
- f) greater understanding, education about, and actions that will address the local, national, and international causes of the conditions that create illegal immigration,
- g) informed, collaborative ministries in our churches that meet the needs of new immigrants to our communities, and
- h) a comprehensive network of social services and advocacy for migrant families.

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