

“Our Immigrant Neighbors: A Call to Reveal God’s Works”

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Abstract:

Immigration and refugee realities, laws, policies, and practices have sparked deep controversy and acrimonious debate in the U.S. and throughout the world in recent years. Political conservatives in the U.S. hold a common public perception that our country’s current immigration and refugee policies are preferential and protective of “illegals,” they are relaxed, and broken which in turn creates dangerous national security threats and economic burdens. Liberals argue that most “undocumented” immigrants are productive, law-abiding members of society, deeply rooted in communities all over the country, working hard, living quietly, paying taxes, and raising families. Conservatives favor deportation of all “illegals” in the U.S. Liberals favor enhanced and expanded pathways to citizenship and asylum for “undocumented” immigrants and refugees. Christians and United Methodists of good conscience stand on both sides of the issue.

This paper claims that we have ample Wesleyan resources – Scripture, Tradition, Reason, and Experience - that help provide us with a more informed perspective and response to the realities of immigration that is faithful to the gospel and enjoins us to Christ’s liberating and saving actions in the world within our local and broader contexts. The paper also claims that moving toward our immigrant neighbors will transform us into more Christlikeness and reveal God’s works.

My Context for Reflection: The Kansas-Nebraska Immigration Reality

Kansas and Nebraska have small but growing immigrant populations. About 7% of each state's population emigrated from another country. Mexican immigrants make up the top country of origin in Kansas and Nebraska at 40.5% and 35.5%, respectively. Guatemalans account for 2.7% of the immigrant population in Kansas and 4.4% of Nebraska's immigrant population. Salvadorans account for 3% of the immigrant population in Nebraska.

Immigrants are a critical component of the labor force in both states. In Kansas, manufacturing relies on immigrants for 18% of its employees. In Nebraska, 17% of the state's computer and math science professionals are immigrants, as are 18% of Nebraskans in the production industry. As workers, business owners, taxpayers and neighbors, immigrants are integral in the diverse and thriving communities and make extensive contributions that benefit all, supporting Kansas and Nebraska's economies across sectors. In 2017, immigrant-led households in Kansas and Nebraska paid \$1.36 billion in federal taxes and \$733.3 million in state taxes.¹

Immigrants and refugees spend hundreds of millions of dollars in Kansas and Nebraska every year, stimulating local and state economies. Children of migrants enrolled in elementary, middle, and high schools draw hundreds of millions of dollars of federal and state revenue aid for education into their local school districts, which in turn provides tens of thousands of jobs for school employees and school product vendors.

Both Kansas and Nebraska heavily rely on immigrants to keep their multi-million dollar agricultural, meat, and poultry industries running. Chuck Folken, a farmer from Leigh, Nebraska, supports President Donald Trump and voted for him, but disagrees with Trump's immigration policies. He says agricultural and meatpacking states like Nebraska and Kansas could not produce the billions of dollars in revenue they do now without immigrant labor. He favors a skilled worker status and supports a path to citizenship for undocumented workers.²

Unauthorized immigrants are systematically excluded from receiving benefits even when they have proven a tremendous benefit to the U.S. workforce and economy by producing goods and services, spending, increasing company profits through lower wages, and paying taxes.

The Current National Immigration Reality

Of the 1,951-mile border between the U.S. and Mexico, approximately 700 miles are fenced or walled. The 1,251 unfenced miles are surveilled by aerostat blimps. The U.S.-Mexico border is the most frequently crossed international boundary in the world, with around 350 million legal crossings every year. There's no official measure of how many people succeed in illegally crossing the border, but authorities use the number of apprehensions to gauge changes in illegal immigration.

¹ Immigrants in Kansas. (2018, May 09). Retrieved July 25, 2018, from <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/immigrants-in-kansas> and Immigrants in Nebraska. (2018, May 09). Retrieved July 25, 2018, from <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/immigrants-in-nebraska>

² Khrais, R., & Palacios, D. (2017, September 8). In Nebraska, immigrants work hard-to-fill jobs in meatpacking industry. Retrieved July 25, 2018, from <https://www.marketplace.org/2017/09/07/economy/nebraska-immigrants-work-hard-fill-jobs-meatpacking-industr>

Apprehensions on the Southwest Border peaked in 2000 at 1.64 million and had generally declined since 303,916 in 2017,³ or an 81.5% reduction; 35% under the Obama administration (2009-2017) and an additional 43% under the Trump administration (2017-2018).

There is much controversy and acrimonious debate in the U.S. today over immigration and refugee law and public policy, especially over the separation of families. Conservatives in the U.S. hold a common public perception that our country's immigration and refugee policies are preferential to and protective of non-Americans, relaxed, and broken, which in turn creates national security threats and economic burdens. The perception is that "illegal aliens" are "invading," "cutting line,"⁴ and "infesting"⁵ the U.S., stealing American jobs, lowering wages for American workers through their cheap labor, cheating on welfare, and engaging in violent crime, rape, and drug trafficking.

Liberals, on the other hand, argue that most "undocumented" immigrants are productive, law-abiding members of society, deeply rooted in communities all over the country, working hard, living quietly, paying taxes and raising families.⁶ According to the Migration Policy Institute, 820,000 of the 12 million unauthorized immigrants have been convicted of a crime; 520,000 have been arrested for administrative crimes such as using a false Social Security number or for being in the country without authorization. About 300,000, or less than 3% of the 12 million persons illegally in the U.S., have committed violent felonies. (The proportion of undocumented immigrant felons in the overall incarcerated population was an estimated 6% in 2010 (2.20m total), according to a paper presented to the Population Association of America.⁷)

Conservatives argue border security is essential national security and want secure borders and stronger enforcement of existing immigration laws and policies. Liberals frame the immigration and refugee issue as a humanitarian crisis that requires immigration policy reforms that both honor our country's laws, our need for security, and provides humanitarian considerations and pathways to citizenship and asylum for persons seeking to enter the U.S.

A Current History of U.S. Immigration Policies

Barak Obama tried to reform immigration law and policy in the U.S during his presidency with the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and the Priority Enforcement Program (PEP).

On June 15, 2012, then-Secretary of Homeland Security (DHS) Janet Napolitano issued a memo to her staff with directives on how "the DHS should enforce the Nation's immigration laws against

³ Robertson, L. (2018, July 02). Illegal Immigration Statistics. Retrieved August 3, 2018, from <https://www.factcheck.org/2018/06/illegal-immigration-statistics/>

⁴ Hoshchild, A.R. (2018). Strangers in their own land: Anger and mourning on the American Right. New York: The New Press. Chapter 9, "The Deep Story." 131-154.

⁵ donaldjtrump. (2018, June 19). "Democrats are the problem. They don't care about crime and want illegal immigrants, no matter how bad they may be, to pour into and infest our Country, like MS-13. They can't win on their terrible policies, so they view them as potential voters!" [Tweet]

⁶ Yee, V., Davis, K., & Patel, J. K. (2017, March 06). Here's the Reality About Illegal Immigrants in the United States. Retrieved July 28, 2018, from <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/03/06/us/politics/undocumented-illegal-immigrants.html>

⁷ Ibid. Of the 820,000 immigrants in the U.S. arrested, 520,000 are arrested for overstaying their visas. Overstaying a visa is not a felony, it is an administrative offense such as living in the U.S without permission or minor crimes that enable immigrants to work here, like driving without a license or using a fake Social Security number.

certain people who were brought to this country as children and knew only this country as home.”⁸ President Obama and the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) adopted the DHS policy for deferred action for childhood arrivals on that day. Under DACA, 740,000 young people brought into the U.S. when they were children were protected from deportation and given the authorization to work in the U.S. The initiative also expanded access to post-secondary and in-state tuition rates motivating students to pursue higher education and achieve their dreams but did not provide a path to citizenship for recipients. Under DACA, recipients could work, pay taxes, get a driver’s license and otherwise integrate into American society. In November 2014, Obama announced his intention to expand DACA to cover additional illegal immigrants. Multiple states immediately sued to prevent the expansion. The DHS rescinded the expansion on June 16, 2017.

The Secure Communities program was launched and piloted in 2008 under the George W. Bush administration. The Secure Communities program linked federal information sharing between Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and local law enforcement in efforts to expand and expedite criminal apprehensions. The program prioritized the removal of individuals that presented the most significant threats to public safety as determined by the severity of their crime, their criminal history, and risk to public safety – as well as those who have violated the nation’s immigration laws. **The Secure Communities program resulted in the deportation of thousands of immigrants with minor criminal convictions or no criminal histories at all.** Due to concerns over racial profiling, the relationship between federal and local law enforcement agencies that became obstacles to community policing, and a lack of complaint mechanisms for the individuals erroneously identified by DHS databases, Obama ended the Secure Communities program in November 2014 and replaced it with the Priority Enforcement Program (PEP). PEP reprioritized the focus on apprehending unauthorized immigrants in the U.S. with serious criminal convictions rather than focusing on immigrants in the U.S. with overstayed visas or without documentation. Obama’s immigration policy reforms were blamed for sending the wrong message to people that wanted to come into the U.S. illegally.

Donald Trump made immigration the centerpiece of his platform in his 2016 bid for president. He proposed mass deportation of illegal immigrants. Before his election, Trump laid out a 10-step plan where he reiterated that all illegal immigrants are “subject to deportation” with priority given to illegal immigrants who have committed significant crimes and those who have overstayed visas. He noted that all those seeking legalizations would have to go home and re-enter the country legally. He also noted that the U.S. would build a 2200 mile wall and Mexico would pay for it.

On January 25, 2017, Trump signed Executive Order 13768, “Enhancing Public Safety in the Interior of the United States,” which stated that “sanctuary jurisdictions” including “sanctuary cities” who refused to comply with immigration enforcement measures would not be “eligible to receive Federal grants, except as deemed necessary for law enforcement purposes.”

Legal challenges to the order were brought almost immediately after its issuance. On November 21, 2017, section 9(a) – “Disqualification of sanctuary cities from federal grants” -- of the executive

⁸ Napolitano, J. (2012, June 15). Exercising Prosecutorial Discretion with Respect to Individuals Who Came to the United States as Children [Memo to David V. Aguilar Acting Commissioner, U.S. Customs and Border Protection Alejandro Mayorkas Director, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services John Morton Director, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement]. Washington, D.C.

order was declared unconstitutional by Judge William Orrick III, who issued a nationwide permanent injunction against its implementation.

Other major actions by the Trump administration on immigration include (1) a travel ban on people from eight countries, most Muslim-majority;⁹ (2) heightened screening and vetting standards and reduced refugee admissions; (3) an increase in the arrests of unauthorized immigrants in the U.S. interior; (4) cancellation of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program;¹⁰ and, (5) the ending of Temporary Protected Status (TPS)¹¹ for nationals from Haiti, Nicaragua, Sudan, El Salvador, Honduras, and Nepal currently living in the U.S.

Numerous politicians, corporate leaders, religious groups, and individuals criticized the zero-tolerance policy. Trump signed an executive order on June 20, 2018, that reversed the policy of separating children from families unless there was a concern that detention of an alien child with the child's alien parent would pose a risk to the child's welfare.

Despite major immigration actions by the administration, Kirstjen Nielsen, the U.S. Homeland Security Secretary, says the number of people attempting to cross the southern border illegally has increased to more than 50,000 per month. In June, she said, there had been a 325% increase in unaccompanied children coming to the border over the previous year and a 435% increase in families entering the U.S. illegally.¹²

In response, interior enforcement and administration of immigration laws have been vigorously strengthened and applied. Laws and admission processes have become more stringent. Border security has been bolstered, inter-agency intelligence-sharing networks have been strengthened, and deportation processes have been expedited. Still, hundreds of thousands of migrants and refugees from Mexico, Central America, and other parts of Latin America “leave their homelands, with a suitcase full of fears and desires, to undertake a hopeful and dangerous trip in search of more humane living conditions.”¹³

The Global Immigration Reality

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations Migration Agency estimated that there were 215 million international immigrants (3% of the population) in the world in 2015. Estimates predict 405 million international immigrants by 2050. There is no global international immigration or refugee policy governance framework or compact. State sovereignty is

⁹ The eight countries on the travel ban that did not pass Department of Homeland Security assessment criteria for cooperation and information sharing are: Venezuela, Libya, Chad, Syria, Iran, Yemen, Somalia, and North Korea.

¹⁰ DACA provides working authorization and temporary relieve from deportation to approximately 742,000 unauthorized immigrants brought to the U.S. as children who arrived in the U.S. before age 16, and lived in the U.S. since 2007, and who are either high school graduates or currently enrolled in school. The program remains in place and is pending litigation.

¹¹ TPS was established by the U.S. Congress in 1990 to provide legal status to migrants from countries that have suffered natural disasters, protracted unrest, or conflict. The program, with over 30 years of bi-partisan support, was first offered to Salvadorans fleeing civil war. The program allows migrants to stay in the U.S. for up to 18 months, which the U.S. government can renew indefinitely. The administration claims that these countries have sufficiently recovered for migrants to safely return. The migrants have between 12-18 months to remain in the U.S. and plan for their repatriation.

¹² Schallhorn, K. (2018, June 19). What Trump's 'zero-tolerance' immigration policy means for children separated from families at border. Retrieved July 23, 2018, from <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2018/06/19/what-trumps-zero-tolerance-immigration-policy-means-for-children-separated-from-families-at-border.html>

¹³ Pope Francis. (3, September 14). “Church without Frontiers, Mother to All” on 101st World Day of Migrants and Refugees.

the main organizing principle in world politics. Each nation-state has the right to set its immigration, and refugee laws and policies and each state has the ultimate responsibility for ensuring the well-being of their people. States malfunction when they cannot ensure that her people live in dignity and safety due to conflict, natural or human-made disasters, food insecurity, famine and drought, the collapse of livelihood, or because of authoritarian or dictatorial governments will not ensure human rights for all her people. In such a case, a substitute provider (nation) of human rights can stand in and assume responsibility for people's protection and wellbeing by providing asylum.

Asylum for refugees was created after World War II as a mandate to European countries to receive and protect persons actively pursued and persecuted by their government because of race, religion, nationality, membership of a social group or political opinion. Under the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees, a state receiving a refugee could not forcibly return a refugee to his or her country of origin and should instead provide sanctuary to that person in the form of asylum, at least until a viable long-term solution is found. The United Nations General Assembly expanded the mandate in 1967 as refugee challenges began expanding in other parts of the world.¹⁴

Why People Continue to Emigrate from Mexico and Central America to the U.S.

No single reason explains why people emigrate from Mexico and Central America for the U.S. A majority come voluntarily for economic reasons, including the desire to support their families. Others come to unify with family already established, and because of their social networks in the U.S. Still others come as refugees, in fear for their lives because their country cannot protect their well-being. People are motivated to emigrate because the potential gains from migration are preferable to remaining in the home community.

Overall, most unauthorized immigrants come to the U.S. from Mexico and Central America because their states or nation cannot ensure the inherent dignity and equal and inalienable rights of her citizens to freedom, justice, and peace.¹⁵ Causal factors driving emigration are environmental change, natural- and human-made disaster, food insecurity, famine and drought, state fragility, generalized violence, massive violations of human rights, globalization, internal armed conflict, and the collapse of livelihoods. When states fail to provide infrastructures and resources for her peoples that ensure their livelihood, the people become desperate and resort to fleeing from their homes to cross international borders to survive. Economic migrants and refugees emigrate to survive because of an “existential threat for which they have scarce or no access to a domestic remedy or resolution.”¹⁶

Perils of Migration

Men, women, and children fleeing existential threats to their lives in Mexico and Central America face more violence, crime, and abuses as they make their way up north to the U.S. international border. Migrants and refugees testify to extortion, kidnapping, torture, sexual abuse and rape, homicide, robbery, forced disappearances, and witnessing grave crimes. Human rights organizations report that six of 10 women are raped along the journey. The crimes and abuses are rarely reported or denounced by migrants because they fear the authorities or because they fear the organized crime

¹⁴ Betts, Alexander. *Survival Migration: Failed Governance and the Crisis of Displacement*. (2013) Cornell University Press, 13.

¹⁵ Preamble to The Universal Declaration of Human Rights drafted by representatives with different legal and cultural backgrounds from all regions of world and proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly in Paris on December 10, 1948.

¹⁶ Betts, 23.

groups responsible for the violence and abuse they experience and witness. Therefore, crimes and abuses are not investigated or punished due to fear of deportation, fear of further violence, and a lack of will and resources from the authorities.

Once people do make it into the U.S., they live lives in the shadows of existence, living on the edge of the law, invisible, in a state of chronic fear and anguish waiting for the inevitable day when they will be found out, arrested, detained, and deported. One consequence of living in the shadows is that an immigrant's economic and legal vulnerability plays into the hands of U.S. employers seeking cheap labor and traffickers seeking to exploit them.¹⁷ The U.S. Department of Justice reports that human trafficking is one of the largest criminal industries in the world. Kansas was identified as an "originating state" for human trafficking. Undocumented immigrant women and children who are already in vulnerable situations are especially at risk. In 2017, the Kansas Attorney General reported serving 475 trafficking victims, including sex and labor trafficking.

But there are also other dangers and damaging effects on an immigrant's integrity and dignity that have present and long-term consequences for their future and the future of their generations. The reality of living a hidden life within an unwelcoming social context where one is unaccepted is psychological, emotionally, socially, economically, and spiritually devastating.

Freedom not to Care

The empathy level for survival immigrants and refugees coming into the U.S. is nearly exhausted in people who feel like their interests and welfare are overlooked in favor of unauthorized immigrants and refugees that pose economic, cultural, social, demographic, political, and security threats to the country.

In *Strangers in their Own Land*, Arlie Russell Hochschild says that people with anti-immigrant sentiments feel harassed by pleas for sympathy to the plight of the immigrants and refugees and feel guilty if they don't express it. The election of President Donald Trump and his strong anti-immigration rhetoric and actions have freed many Americans from the burden of having to pretend to sympathize and care for immigrants and refugees seeking to enter the U.S., legally or illegally.

Wesley and Emigration

John Wesley did not face the crisis of migration into his homeland caused by voluntary economic emigration of people from other countries or the influx of refugees escaping persecution in their countries. He did face and denounce the humanitarian crisis of the forced migration of Africans through the appalling institution of slavery.

In his pamphlet "Thoughts Upon Slavery,"¹⁸ Wesley denounced the dehumanizing and barbarous industry of slavery. He recounted many instances of fraud and violence, described the middle passage atrocities in gruesome detail, and the inhumane treatment of slaves in the West Indies and other slave states (including the southern U.S.). He wrote that those who practice slavery "want all

¹⁷ Richardson, Chad & Rosalva Resendiz, *On the Edge of the Law: Culture, Labor & Deviance on the South Texas Border*. (2006) The University of Texas Press, 274.

¹⁸ Wesley, John. (1773). "Thoughts Upon Slavery."

moral virtues and have become haughty, hasty, hard-hearted, passionate, voluptuous and cruel.”¹⁹ He argued slavery was indefensible, even when authorized by law.

To bring about compunction and repentance of the calloused hearts and consciousness of the slave ship captains, the slave merchants, and plantation owners, Wesley wrote:

“Are you *a man*? Then you should have a *human* heart. But have you indeed? What is your heart made of? Is there no such principle as compassion there? Do you never *feel* another's pain? Have you no sympathy? No sense of human woe? No pity for the miserable? When you saw the flowing eyes, the heaving breasts, the bleeding sides and tortured limbs of your fellow-creatures, was you a stone, or a brute? Did you look upon them with the eyes of a tiger? When you squeezed the agonizing creatures down in the ship, or when you threw their poor mangled remains into the sea, had you no relenting? Did not one teardrop from your eye, one sigh escape from your breast? Do you feel no relenting *now*? If you do not, you must go on, till the measure of your iniquities is full. Then will the great GOD deal with *you*, as you have dealt with *them*, and require all their blood at your hands. And on that day it shall be more tolerable for *Sodom* and *Gomorrhah* than for you! But if your heart does relent, though in a small degree, know it is a call from the GOD of love. And today, if you hear his voice, harden not your heart. Today resolve, GOD being your helper, to escape for your life.-- Regard not money! All that a man hath will he give for his life? Whatever you lose, lose not your soul: nothing can countervail that loss. Immediately quit the horrid trade: At all events, be an honest man.”²⁰

Wesley pleaded for an end to slavery on the basis of natural justice, not to mention mercy, nor the revealed law of God. Liberty is the right of every human creature, Wesley said, and no human law could deprive him of that right which is derived from the law of nature. At one point, Wesley prayerfully interceded for freedom of the slaves and prayed for conversion of the “dark Americans.”

“O thou GOD of love, thou who art loving to every man, and whose mercy is over all thy works: Thou who art the father of the spirits of all flesh, and who art rich in mercy unto all: Thou who hast mingled of one blood, all the nations upon earth: Have compassion upon these outcasts of men, who are trodden down as dung upon the earth! Arise and help these that have no helper, whose blood is spilt upon the ground like water! Are not these also the work of thine own hands, the purchase of thy Son's blood? Stir them up to cry unto thee in the land of their captivity; and let their complaint come up before thee; let it enter into thy ears! Make even those that lead them away captive to pity them and turn their captivity as the rivers in the south. O burst thou all their chains in sunder; more especially the chains of their sins: Thou, Saviour of all, make them free, that they may be free indeed! The servile progeny of *Ham* seize as the purchase of thy blood! Let all the heathen know thy name: From idols to the living GOD the dark *Americans* convert, and shine in every pagan heart!”²¹

While voluntary economic and forced, refugee migration is not comparable to the slave-trading industry, the vulnerabilities of migrants living in the shadows within the U.S. have led to severe mistreatment and their abduction into various forms of dehumanization. In that sense, Wesley's

¹⁹ Ibid, 8.

²⁰ Ibid., 52-53

²¹ Ibid., 56-57.

active stance and admonitions to have compassion, feel the pain, and care for the vulnerable and helpless applies to our current immigration and refugee crisis.

Politically Harassed for Compassion or Compelled by the Holy Spirit to Care?

In “The Marks of the New Birth” (Sermon 18), Wesley pointed to faith, hope, and love as the three defining characteristics or marks of those that have been born of God. Faith is both a belief in the truth of Christ and Christ’s salvation and sanctification and the efficacy of those truths on the lives that trust in his saving grace. Hope rests in the assurance that we are God’s children and that we have joyful access to God’s grace now and in the future. Love, the greatest characteristic or mark of all, results in life fully obedient to God’s commands and desires and consists of love for everyone around us as Christ has loved us.

United Methodists are a people born of the Spirit -- a people of faith, hope, and love. We involve ourselves in people’s lives and in political and social struggles that have local and international implications as we seek justice and liberty for all God’s people. As disciples of Jesus Christ, we discern and distinguish between the harassment of political correctness on our conscious and the promptings of the Holy Spirit to love our neighbor. The harassment of political correctness feels repressive and controlling, guilt-ridden, and produces resentment, shaming, bitterness, anger, and a deepened resolve to resist. The prompting of the Holy Spirit, on the other hand, is freeing, inspirational, and empowering. The Holy Spirit generates compassion, courage, and the mercy to risk and engage in actions on behalf of the vulnerable in our world in the name of Jesus Christ. To have compassion and care for the stranger goes above and beyond political correctness. It is a Christian obligation and desire rooted in our new nature as disciples of Christ born of the Spirit.

Our Faithful Wesleyan Witness and Response to Immigration in the U.S.

As Christians in the Wesleyan tradition, we rely on Scripture as the primary source for our theological reflection. Old Testament readings such as Numbers 20:14-21 and Judges 11:16-20, where kings of Edom, Ammon, and Moab refused to give Israel passage through their territory, could lead one to conclude that each nation has the right to refuse outsiders. The lesson to be drawn is that without authorization, outsiders do not have the right to enter a territory or remain.

When we read the New Testament and Epistles, however, we find a more open stance toward the plight of the immigrants and refugees. To begin, Jesus began his life displaced from his homeland and became a refugee in Egypt. The Holy Family was forced to flee to Egypt when Jesus was a small child to avoid Herod’s violence and slaughter of the innocents.²²

While Jesus did not directly teach on immigration, he did interact with, and welcome people considered outsiders to the Jewish community: Gentiles, women, the sick, the poor, the blind and those considered sinners. The Epistles focus on several “one another” ethics (e.g., love one another, be hospitable to one another, encourage one another, do not pass judgment on one another, etc.) that concern harmonious and hospitable intrarelations within the Christian community and interrelationships between Christians and others outside of the Christian community.

²² Matthew 2

Concerning the Immigration Laws of the Land

Ultimately, our way of being in the world as Christians and United Methodists is set forth by Jesus' Great Commission to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world and the Great Commandment,²³ to love God and neighbor as ourselves.²⁴

In the gospel of John, Jesus and the disciples come upon a man born blind from birth.²⁵ The blind man's name, his physical and social reality, his dignity, and personhood is subordinated to an issue of debate about law-breaking and its consequences. The disciples inquire about the originator of the sin that caused the man's blindness. They ask Jesus, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"²⁶ The Pharisees overlook the blind man's healing and instead treat him with contempt in efforts to gather evidence to convict Jesus of breaking the law by making mud on the Sabbath.²⁷ The blind man's parents do not defend their son for fear.²⁸ Jesus, however, does not engage in the theological, political, social, or religious debate. He sees the blind man's plight, has compassion on the man, and heals him of his blindness and lack of personhood.

Jesus says,

"It is not that he sinned, nor his parents, but so that the works of God may be manifested in him. It is necessary for me to do the works of the one who sent me, while the day lasts; the night is coming when nobody can work. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world."²⁹

Jesus' loving act of healing the man born blind was in and of itself a theological, political, social, and religious statement that revealed the will of God for all people on the margins of society. As Jesus moved to the blind man and healed him, the world changed.

Gustavo Gutierrez describes the conversion that takes place in us when we move toward the other in the following way:

"Love of neighbor is an essential component of Christian existence. But while I consider my neighbor, the "near" one, the one I find on my way, the one who comes to me asking for help, my world remains the same ... if, on the contrary, I consider my neighbor the one to whom I move ... the "far away" neighbor, in the streets, in farms, factories, and mines, then my world changes."³⁰

In a letter to the inhabitants of Ireland lately arrived to the City of New York, President George Washington writes,

"The bosom of America is open to receive not only the opulent & respectable Stranger but the oppressed & persecuted of all Nations & Religions; whom we shall welcome to a participation of all our rights & privileges if by decency & propriety of conduct they appear to merit the enjoyment."³¹

²³ Matthew 28:16-20; Mark 16:35; Acts 1:8; John 3:16; Luke 24:46-47

²⁴ Matthew 7:12, 22:26-28, 36-40; Mark 12:28-34; Luke 6:31, 10:27; John 13:34-35; Galatians 5:14;

²⁵ John 9:1

²⁶ John 9:2

²⁷ John 9:13-34

²⁸ John 9:18-23

²⁹ John 9:3-5

³⁰ Gutierrez, G. (1973). *A Theology of Liberation*. N.Y.: Maryknoll, 204-205.

³¹ Founders Online: From George Washington to Joshua Holmes, 2 December 1783. (n.d.). Retrieved August 1, 2018, from <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-12127>

There is much work to do with the immigrants that are in the U.S. without authorization. The presence of immigrants among us calls us to do God's works as we are able with humility, love, and justice. At the local level, immigrants are in need of being treated humanely, with care and compassion. At the national level, compromising immigration reform is needed that increases our border security and enforcement while providing legal status and a path to citizenship to the vast majority of the 12 million undocumented persons already in the U.S. living in the decency of character and conduct and which restructures visa criteria for low and high-skilled workers.

As Christians, we are called to respect our government and uphold the laws that express the life-giving moral values of our faith. As so, we live in a country that affords us the constitutional right to agree or disagree with our nation's laws. We express our approval or disapproval with our government and our leaders in numerous ways. We vote in support of or in opposition to our government. We publish and broadcast viewpoints that support or oppose our government. We create organizations that promote and defend or oppose and denounce our government's policies. We participate in peaceful rallies or protests that either support or oppose our government.

Our baptism and discipleship call us to uphold the sacredness of all human life and to work toward a world of peace and justice until Christ returns. Our Wesleyan Social Principles call us to

“Recognize, embrace, and affirm all persons, regardless of country of origin, as members of the family of God. We affirm the right of all persons to equal opportunities for employment, access to housing, healthcare, education, and freedom from social discrimination. We recognize the gifts, contributions, and struggles of those who are immigrants and to advocate for justice for all. We oppose immigration policies that separate family members from each other or that include detention of families with children, and we call on local churches to be in ministry with immigrant families.”³²

We seek the transformation of our hearts and the world so we can reveal and do God's works with compassion, humility, a sense of justice, and with love for people on both sides of the immigration issue. We join ourselves with Christ as we pray for God's kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven where a great multitude that no one can count, from every nation, tribe, people, and language, stand before the throne and before the Lamb eternally united in faith, hope, and love.³³

ADDENDUM

Practical Ministry with Immigrants and Refugees

³² *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church*. (2016). ¶162. III The Social Community (H) *Rights of Immigrants*. Nashville, TN: United Methodist Publishing House.

³³ Revelation 7:9

Most communities and cities have migrant and refugee populations. Some communities have no agencies to assist immigrants and refugees, others do. Congregations can lead the work with immigrants and refugees in a community, or they can collaborate with existing agencies that provide advocacy, services, housing, legal advice, job training, and more.

Below are some ways individuals and congregation can engage in efforts that seek the welfare of the immigrant and refugee in our midst.

- To begin, ask the Holy Spirit to enable you to see everyone as a person of sacred worth with hopes and dreams like yours. Do whatever you can to do no harm and do as much good as you can to alleviate human suffering in the name of Jesus Christ.
- Organize a standing committee of persons within your local congregation that will focus on leading the congregation to engage with and advocate for the immigrant or refugee population in the community and beyond. The committee would assess the needs and opportunities for ministry with the immigrant and refugee population, envision the ministry and its scope, organize initiatives, secure and provide resources and guidance for volunteers, collaborate with community leaders, monitor the engagement between the congregation and the immigrant/refugee community, and resolve conflicts to ensure success.
- Develop a sermon series, convene workshops, and Bible studies for your congregation that addresses the causes (push/pull factors) of immigration. Invite guest speakers to talk to your congregation about immigration issues and experiences.
- 90% of the immigrants from Mexico and Central America claim an affiliation with the Roman Catholic and Protestant faith traditions.³⁴ Offer them Christ and the Wesleyan means of grace: worship, prayer, and the sacraments of baptism and holy communion.
- Invest in audio equipment so that a bilingual person can simultaneously interpret an English sermon into Spanish during a worship service.
- Seek ways to offer the ministry of prayer for the sick and the troubled in their homes, hospitals, county jails, or detention centers.
- Teach immigrant and refugee populations English, GED, and computer literacy.
- Allow your church space to be used as a community center for the immigrant community to worship, have bible study, to pray, fellowship, gather for celebrations, participate in health screenings, and to learn about immigration laws and rights and other issues or information that are relevant to their reality.
- Donate to organizations that provide legal services for immigrants, refugees, or asylum seekers.
- Volunteer at your local elementary, middle, or high school as a reader for recently arrived children and youth to help them stay up with school work and learn English.
- Adopt one or more resettled families individually or as a congregation and help the family meet their basic needs and successfully integrate into their new life.
- Contact elected local, state, and national officials expressing your thoughts and values about immigration and refugee assistance. Be brief, share your points of concern and how you hope the official responds.

³⁴ Wormald, B. (2014, November 13). Religion in Latin America. Retrieved July 26, 2018, from <http://www.pewforum.org/2014/11/13/religion-in-latin-america/>

- Host an International Fair at your church, invite the community, and invite people from other countries to share food, their music, and their stories of their family and their country of origin.
- Help immigrants develop a business plan, help them secure a micro-loan for the start-up of a small business, help them implement the infrastructures for the business, and coach them until their business becomes established and self-sustaining.
- Organize or attend a rally or prayer vigil that inspires hope for those in despair and encourages officials to take action for change that favors the wellbeing of the immigrant.