

## THE STRANGER AMONG US: Following Jesus and Welcoming Immigrants

**O**n any given Sunday around the country, American Baptist congregations reflect a mosaic of cultures, races, languages, and ethnicities. American Baptists have historically been at our best when we exemplified Christian hospitality and inclusion of our immigrant and refugee neighbors. Since our inception we have been at the forefront of welcoming immigrants into our country and into our churches. God has used this faithful response to “strangers” to profoundly shape our denomination so that no one racial or ethnic group holds majority membership in the American Baptist Churches USA. God has woven us into a coat of many colors.

The rich diversity of American Baptist life is inextricably linked with the U.S. American story of welcoming the “tired ... poor ... huddled masses yearning to breathe free.” The United States is a nation of immigrants.



Historically, however, the beauty of our diversity as a nation has often been marred by anti-immigrant sentiments. One of the first noted debates on immigration took place over German immigrants in the 1700s, when we were still part of the British Empire. German immigrants were viewed as a threat to the newly developing country, a fear reflected in the following statement by Benjamin Franklin:

**Why should *Pennsylvania*, founded by the *English*, become a Colony of *Aliens*, who will shortly be so numerous as to Germanize us instead of our Anglifying them, and will never adopt our Language or Customs, any more than they can acquire our Complexion (from “Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind, Peopling of Countries, etc.,” 1751).**

Throughout our history, new immigrant groups have met with mixed reception when entering the United States. Often ostracized, they have faced—and continue to face—discrimination and suspicion. They have also, at times, been welcomed and embraced as new neighbors and recognized for their significant contributions toward making the United States the great country it is today.

As witnesses of Christ, we are taught not only to love our neighbors but also to think radically as we consider the question, “Who is my neighbor?” At our best, American Baptists have stood for inclusion of and hospitality toward our immigrant and refugee neighbors. The effort to welcome immigrants among us was formalized in 1919 by the Woman’s American Baptist Home Mission Society, when they launched The Christian Friendliness program as a Christian Americanization program whose goal was to change fear and hostility toward strangers into understanding and friendship.

American Baptist history is grounded in a set of moral and theological principles that have served as foundational support for addressing immigration:

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- We believe that all people, regardless of national origin, are made in the “image of God” and deserve to be treated with dignity and respect (Genesis 1:26-27, 9:6).
- We believe there is an undeniable biblical responsibility to love and show compassion for the stranger among us (Deuteronomy 10:18-19, Leviticus 19:33-34, Matthew 25:31-46).
- We believe that immigrants are our neighbors, both literally and figuratively, and we are to love our neighbors as ourselves and show mercy to neighbors in need (Leviticus 19:18, Mark 12:31, Luke 10:25-37).
- We believe in the rule of law, but we also believe that laws and systems should not harm and oppress people made in God’s image, especially the vulnerable (Isaiah 10:1-4, Jeremiah 7:1-7, Acts 5:29, Romans 13:1-7).

These principles have also served as the moral and theological base for a host of other Christian denominations and organizations as they work at addressing immigration issues—including the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, the National Association of Evangelicals, Church World Service, the Mennonite Church USA, and the Presbyterian Church (USA).

The goal of seeking understanding of and offering Christian hospitality to immigrants is as imperative today as it has ever been. For a variety of reasons, the immigration issue has reached a fever pitch in the United States. The public debate, largely shaped by the media, has laid the foundation for a perfect storm that could lead to racial divisiveness, anger, and chaos in our homes, churches, and communities. Faith communities are uniquely positioned to serve as voices of reason and compassion. God has blessed the American Baptist family with many faces and many voices, but we serve one God. It is imperative that we seek divine guidance and direction for how to best address this issue as individuals, congregations, and communities. The Web page for the Office of Immigration and Refugee Services, at the American Baptist Home Mission Societies Web site ([www.abhms.org/justice\\_ministries/immigration\\_and\\_refugee\\_services/](http://www.abhms.org/justice_ministries/immigration_and_refugee_services/)), offers links to a wide range of resources and organizations to assist churches in seeking God’s guidance on this very important issue, including:

- An American Baptist family letter on engagement in immigration and immigration reform (English and Spanish)
- American Baptist immigration and refugee policy statements and declarations
- *America’s Voice*, whose goal is reform that will transform a dysfunctional immigration system into a functional regulatory system (English and Spanish)
- *Christians for Comprehensive Immigration Reform*, a coalition of Christian organizations, churches, and

leaders from across the theological and political spectrum, united in support of comprehensive U.S. immigration reform

- *Church World Service*, an ecumenical cooperation (of which American Baptist Churches USA is a founding member) of Christian denominations coming together to “do in partnership what none of us could hope to do well alone”
- *Immigration: Myths and Facts*, a document by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce’s Labor, Immigration & Employee Benefits Division
- *Sermon Illustration Packet on Immigration*, with preaching material on the biblical call to hospitality
- *Welcome the Stranger: An Organizer’s Tool Kit*, designed to help people of faith educate their communities on immigration, with resources ranging from a biblical overview of immigration to a guide on how to write a press advisory (English and Spanish)
- *Welcome the Stranger National Brochure*, discusses why immigration policy is important to evangelicals

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### Sources and Resources

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- *Christians at the Border: Immigration, the Church, and the Bible*, R. M. Daniel Carroll (Baker Academic Press, 2008)
- *Coming to America: A History of Immigration and Ethnicity in American Life*, Roger Daniels (Harper Collins Press, 2002)
- *Listen to the Children: Conversations with Immigrant Families*, Elizabeth Conde-Frazier (Judson Press, 2011)
- *The Politics of Immigration: Questions and Answers*, Jane Guskin and David Wilson (Monthly Review Press, 2007)
- *Welcome the Stranger: Justice, Compassion, and Truth in the Immigration Debate*, Matthew Soerens and Jenny Hwang (Intervarsity Press, 2009)