

Becoming an Immigrant Welcoming Congregation



The Journey is Made by Walking

The United Church of Christ has a long history of working in the fields of justice. One of our strongest justice endeavors has been standing with our lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender sisters and brothers and advocating their full inclusion in church and society through the Open and Affirming process. The Open and Affirming process is an experience that is filled with education, breaking down stereotypes and getting to know, through face to face encounters, the struggles and suffering of our GLBTQ brothers and sisters. The Open and Affirming process has transformed many members and churches and has helped them connect and be engaged in a real justice issue of our day.

Somewhere along the way of walking toward justice the church and its people have also found other areas where church and society needs to broaden the circle of inclusion. Immigration is one of those areas that have cried out to members and churches to get involved. In the early 1990's with the abrupt change from a National economy to a Global Economy, communities across the country began to experience a wave of immigration that has challenged the U.S. Society and left many with questions and concerns. Some congregations began to study the issue of immigration and learned of root causes, they studied the impact of the Global Economy and Free Trade Agreements, as well as learned about immigrant communities that were present in their cities and towns. Some of these congregations were led to offer direct service while others found different ways to be engaged and involved in the immigrant justice movement. It is amazing how walls and barriers are broken down when people meet face to face, when people become educated, and start looking for solutions.

The church has an important role in the immigration discussion. Our faith tradition and sacred texts are saturated with stories about immigrants. We have a special ability and calling to reach out and love the neighbor---all of our neighbors. But it takes education, face to face encounters, and an effort to engage the sensibilities of our faith. Churches and communities have been asking for a process much like the Open and Affirming process that

When an immigrant resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the immigrant. The immigrant who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the immigrant as yourself, for you were an immigrant in the land of Egypt.

*(Jewish and Christian Tradition,
Leviticus 19:33-34)*

would carefully help them study, engage, and encounter immigrants and the issues that they face. Ultimately the road to immigration reform at a legislative level will demand the broader education of congregations and communities across the country. Our goal with this study is to help your church become an “Immigrant Welcoming Congregation” that can be in solidarity with the immigrant issues in your community. The journey to solidarity can only happen by walking together with our sisters and brothers. Feel free to take these materials and ideas to build your congregation’s own process of becoming an “Immigrant Welcoming Congregation.” Remember to be creative, flexible and engaged. For more information please contact Mari Castellanos, Head of the UCC Immigration Task Force, CastellM@ucc.org, Noel Andersen, Grass Roots Organizer for Immigrant’s Rights for Church World Service, nandersen@churchworldservice.org, Randy Mayer, Pastor of The Good Shepherd UCC in Sahuarita, AZ, biensphrd@aol.com.

The word "Willkommen" is written in a stylized font. The "W" is large and orange, followed by "illkommen" in blue. A yellow horizontal bar is positioned below the "illkommen" part.The word "Bienvenido" is written in a red, cursive script font.The word "Bienvenue" is written in a red, cursive script font, set against a blue circular background.The word "Välkomna" is written in a yellow, cursive script font, set against a blue rectangular background with a red border.The word "Welkom" is written in a blue, cursive script font with red flourishes.

Becoming an Immigrant Welcoming Congregation:

The Journey toward becoming an Immigrant Welcoming Congregation involves multiple study and reflection sessions.

Developing a reservoir of resources and knowledge for a congregation to make an informed decision takes thoughtful and diligent work. It is best to keep everyone engaged in the process and part of the dialogue. Church Councils, Boards of Directors and administrative bodies should be encouraged to attend the gatherings as should the youth and young adults. The programs should be aimed at the entire congregation rather than focusing just on a mission or outreach board. At the end of the process it is hoped that the congregation will affirm an “Immigrant Welcoming Congregation” statement that has been written by the congregation. To get to that point it is best to do the ground work and get as many people involved in the education process. As with the Open and Affirming process, it is important to develop a thorough process and then trust the people and the process--once people are engaged and educated things begin to fall into place. Here is a list of possible themes and study sessions.

1. Understanding Our Faith

Nearly all of our biblical heroes are immigrants. In fact some have said the Bible is an “Immigrant’s Handbook.” So it is important to get some biblical and faith grounding to the immigration issue. There are many resources available. One that has been very good is called Strangers in the Land which is six-week program that deals with issues of immigration, the church and the Bible and is put out by Sojourner Magazine. You can order it for \$9.95 at: www.faithandimmigration.org/resources/strangers-land

Let a person never turn away a stranger from his house, that is the rule. Therefore a man should, by all means, acquire much food, for good people say to the stranger: 'There is enough food for you.'

*(Hindu Tradition,
Taittiriya Upanishad 1.11.2)*

2. Building Relationships through Face to Face Encounters

The basic root of building a movement for justice for immigrants is developing relationships. Once you get to know people face to face and hear their struggles the relationships are cemented and change can begin. There are lots of ways of doing this here are a few examples:

- Have a forum to hear the stories of DREAM Act Youth (Young immigrants brought to the US as children and are trying to get permanent residency).
- Invite some Day Laborers to come and talk about their journey and struggle in finding work.
- Contact an Immigrant Rights group and ask them to come and share their story in a panel or forum.

3. Learn about the Root Causes for Immigration

It is important to study and learn about the history that has long pushed migrants from their country of origin and pulled them into the United States. The North American Free Trade

Agreement is an important turning point in the immigrant push to come to the United States.

- Roots of Migration: <http://www.witnessforpeace.org/section.php?id=121>
- Rethinking the Immigration Debate: Addressing the Root Causes of Mexican Migration [http://www.rop.org/wp-content/uploads/Root Causes of Mexican Migration.pdf](http://www.rop.org/wp-content/uploads/Root%20Causes%20of%20Mexican%20Migration.pdf)
- Oregon New Sanctuary Movement Faith and Immigration Study guide <http://www.oregonsanctuary.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/onsm-educational-curriculum.pdf>

4. Study the United Church of Christ Teachings on Immigration

The United Church of Christ has a very good web site that has many resources that offer our distinct UCC perspective. It can be found at: www.ucc.org/justice/immigration/general-info/info.

The United Church of Christ has discussed immigration at its General Synod level for more than 20 years. It would be good to check out what we have officially said over the years.

- [A Call for a More Humane U.S. Immigration Policy: End Migrant Deaths; Support Immigrant Communities \(General Synod 26, 2007\)](#)
- [Emergency Resolution to End the Death of Migrants on the United States-Mexico Border by Offering Water in Christ's Name \(General Synod 23, 2001\)](#)
- [Border Justice Issues: A Challenge for the 21st Century Church \(General Synod 22, 1999\)](#)

5. Explore the Topic of Immigration through a DVD

These days there are many well done documentaries and films that help convey the struggles and suffering migrants go through to come to the United States. Show a movie and have a discussion afterwards. Here are a few titles---but there are many more.

- De Nadie –directed my Tin Dirdamal
- Crossing Arizona---directed by Joseph Mathew
- Dying to Get In---Directed by Brett Tolley
- The Gatekeeper---Directed by John Carlos Frey
- Under the Same Moon---Directed by Patricia Riggen

6. Create an Immersion Experience

Sometimes the best way to learn about an issue is to go directly to the source and hear the stories and experience the people face to face. Here are some possibilities in helping you do that.

- Engage a group or groups in you congregation by taking them to an Immigrant Community close to where you live.
- Take them to an ethnic congregation and begin to build relationships.
- Visit an Immigrant Detention Center.
- Take people to the US/Mexico Border and work with the Green Valley Samaritans: www.gvsamaritans.org or with Borderlinks www.borderlinks.org. Or with the Centro Romero: www.theromero.org

Do good unto your parents, and near of kin, and unto orphans, and the needy, and the neighbor from among your own people, and the neighbor who is a stranger, and the friend by your side, the wayfarer, and your servant.

*(Muslim Tradition,
Surah 4:36)*

7. Have a Congregation Wide (or Small Group) Book Study

It is a powerful experience to read a book with your entire congregation. There are multiple ways that you can preach, teach and have smaller discussion groups. Some potential books are:

- **The Devil's Highway.** Luis Alberto Urrea. (A great Study Guide for this book can be found at: www.ucc.org/justice/immigration/pdfs/UCC-Study-Guide-Mike-Devil-Hwy)
- **Enrique's Journey: The Story of a Boy's Dangerous Odyssey to Reunite with his Mother.** Sonia Nazario.
- **Crossing Over: A Mexican Family on the Migrant Trail.** Ruben Martinez.
- **BorderLinks Resource List on books and documentaries:** http://www.borderlinks.org/pdfs/blx_resource_list.pdf

8. Prayerful Action

- Find ways to be in action with immigrant sisters and brothers. Show up at immigrants' rights rallies and marches.

- Call and write your congressperson and Senator to let them know you support immigrant's rights and humane immigration reform.
- Write Op-Eds and letters to the Editor to educate the broader public.
- Write a blog and spread the word through Social Media

9. Local Campaigns to Get Involved In

- *DEFERRED ACTION FOR CHILDHOOD ARRIVALS* help with legal clinics and submission forms so that DREAM Act Youth can get two years of relief from deportation and work permits.
- *STOP ARIZONA STYLE STATE LED ANTI-IMMIGRANT BILLS*: If you live in any of the high threat states such as Kansas, Missouri, Pennsylvania, Arkansas, Mississippi, Florida and more, you could have an anti-immigrant bill coming your way, make sure to advocate against this at the state level
- *RESTORING TRUST CAMPAIGN: STOP "SECURE COMMUNITIES" IMMIGRATION CUSTOMES ENFORCEMENT MASS DEPORTATION PROGRAM*: Stop local Police and ICE Collusion that erodes community trust. Join a local campaign to get a city or local ordinance to stop putting low-priority non-violent undocumented immigrants through Secure Communities see <http://altopolimigra.com/take-action/restoring-trust-campaign/>
- *STATE DREAM ACT: EQUITABLE TUITION*: Be part of winning state pro-immigration reforms, and state laws that charge DREAM Act youth out of state tuition making it too expensive to go to college.
- *CITIZENSHIP DRIVES AND VOTER REGISTRATION* help in your local area for legal clinics that help people adjust their status, become residents or citizens and register to vote.

10. Affirm Our Covenant

Create an "Immigrant Welcoming Congregation Statement" that blesses and affirms your congregation's commitment to being in solidarity with the immigrant community.

Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it. Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as you yourselves were suffering.

(Hebrews 13:1-3)

Roots and History of Immigrant Welcoming Congregations

The Immigrant Welcoming Congregations model has its historical roots in the Sanctuary Movement. During the 1980s many congregations throughout the country, declared themselves “sanctuaries,” and committed to providing shelter, material goods and often legal advice to Central American refugees fleeing civil wars in their home countries. In the context of the Cold War, the U.S. government was involved in supporting government repression in Central America and would not recognize refugee status for those fleeing because of political persecution. Congregations felt called to respond developing a large network of over 500 congregations that offered physical sanctuary in their churches and houses. As a result of the advocacy and organizing efforts that was part of the Sanctuary Movement the House and Senate approved a bill granting temporary protected status (TPS) to Central Americans in need of safe haven in 1990, but not until the 1997 through the Nicaraguan Adjustment and Central American Relief Act did Congress allow fleeing Central Americans to apply for permanent residence.

The history of Sanctuary is still strong today in many congregations; however, we find ourselves in a different political landscape where the need for physical sanctuary is not needed in the same way it was during the context of the 1980s. Rather than escaping civil war, immigrants within our own communities find themselves terrorized by extreme enforcement measures that separate families and divide communities. As a result, two organizers, Jenny Dale and Kristin Kumpf, in Chicago drafted a new model for congregations to work towards being welcoming within their context of continued extreme enforcement measures that are separating families and devastating families. For most congregations, this means moving from a model of mercy and direct service, towards advocating and organizing for immigrants' rights and broad policy changes at the local, state and national levels. This is a step by step journey for faith communities to become Immigrant Welcoming Congregations. Through prayer, reflection, education, relationship building and action congregations can welcome immigrants and collectively work to bring that welcoming spirit to the whole community.

Jenny Dale and the Chicago New Sanctuary Coalition (CNSC) were the first to develop and implement the IWC model, but it is now being utilized with the UMC Global Board of Church and Society, the UCC Justice and Witness Ministries and many New Sanctuary Movement Organizations.

Resource List

There are multiple places to get good resources; as it is imperative to be informed as we continue the struggle for immigrants' rights. Here is a list of favorite organizations and their websites:

- Christians for Comprehensive Immigration Reform---<http://www.faithandimmigration.org>
- Borderlinks---<http://www.borderlinks.org>
- Green Valley/Sahuarita Samaritans---<http://www.gvsamaritans.org>
- United Church of Christ---www.ucc.org/justice/immigration/general-info/info.
- Interfaith Immigration Coalition-- <http://www.interfaithimmigration.org/>
- Church World Service: <http://supportimmigrationreform.org/>
- Derechos Humanos---<http://www.derechoshumanosaz.net>
- Frontera de Cristo---<http://www.fronteradecristo.org>
- Humane Borders---<http://www.humaneborders.org>
- No More Deaths---<http://www.nomoredeaths>
- Witness for Peace <http://www.witnessforpeace.org/>
- Migration Policy Institute <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/>
- National Immigration file://localhost/Law Center <http://www.nilc.org>:
- National Day Labor Organizing Network <http://ndlon.org/en/>
- Oregon New Sanctuary Movement Faith and Immigration Study guide <http://www.oregonsanctuary.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/on-sm-educational-curriculum.pdf>