

## Wyoming Association of Churches Statement on Immigration Reform

In Scripture, the ethical responsibility of extending hospitality to the stranger is a key requirement of faithfulness.

The Hebrew Bible tells us: "The strangers who sojourn with you shall be to you as the natives among you, and you shall love them as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt (Leviticus 19:33-34)." In the New Testament, Jesus tells us to welcome the stranger (cf. Matthew 25:35), for "what you do to the least of my brethren, you do unto me (Matthew 25:40)."

The Bible teaches us that we have all been created in the image of God and God expresses love and concern for all of humanity -- the condition of our lives as well as the condition of our souls. Developing policies based on hate and fear of those who do not look like us -- but, are nevertheless created in the image of God -- is contrary to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and bad public policy.

The first duty is to welcome the foreigner out of charity and respect for the dignity and rights of the human person. Persons historically have immigrated and thus must accommodate this reality to the greatest extent possible, consistent with its other obligations to the common good. The right to immigrate is therefore a qualified, rather than an absolute right.

Christian moral principle implies:

"The more prosperous nations are obliged, to the extent they are able, to welcome the foreigner in search of the security and the means of livelihood which he cannot find in his country of origin. Public authorities should see to it that the natural right is respected that places a guest under the protection of those who receive him." <sup>1</sup>

Throughout history, politicians have tried to convince themselves and others that the biblical call to love, the ministry of hospitality and the Sermon on the Mount are naive, impractical and irrelevant to our complex world. But one cannot -- dare not -- suspend biblical principles simply to advance a political agenda. It comes from an authority higher than Congress, higher than the Department of Homeland Security, higher than the President of the United States and it cannot be ignored." <sup>2</sup>

The Wyoming Association of Churches believes that meaningful immigration reform must balance the right to immigrate and the need for regulation of immigration into the United States. As such, we affirm and encourage our political leaders to follow the guidelines adopted from the Church World Service, Statement on Comprehensive Immigration Reform, in their policy making decisions. We call for reform that will:

► **Improve our family based immigration system** to significantly reduce waiting times for separated families who currently wait many years to be reunited.

► **Create legal avenues for immigrants to safely and legally work** in the United States, with their employee rights fully protected. Reforms should increase the accessibility of legal ports of entry and repair the administrative backlog of immigration applications that prevents people who want to enter the country legally from doing so in a

realistic timeframe. With these mechanisms in place, the border patrol would be able to focus solely on threats to national security.

► **Provide an opportunity for earned legalization** for all persons who already contribute to our economy through social security, sales tax and other mechanisms and dedicate themselves to learning English, working and paying taxes. We do not support blanket amnesty, but instead call for earned legalization as a necessary way to keep families together, remedy the abuse of undocumented workers and enhance governmental awareness of those living in this country.

► **Implement smart, targeted enforcement, not fences.** Our national security should be enhanced through workplace enforcement, more accessible legal ports of entry and earned legalization, rather than policies that have failed in the past such as fences and the militarization of the border. Legislators should also recognize that some employers encourage illegal immigration in order to abuse undocumented employees. Reforms should enable employers to verify and hold them accountable for hiring undocumented workers. ,

► **Mandate that domestic law enforcement agencies focus on the safety of all persons** rather than attempt to serve as immigration enforcement, which hinders justice for immigrants and citizens alike and can result in criminals targeting immigrants who will not report crimes due to fear of deportation. Also, reforms should protect and not punish individuals and organizations which act as Good Samaritans to help people without regard to their immigration status.

► **Safeguard asylum seekers** by ensuring them a fair legal process without penalizing them with increased, unnecessary bureaucracy.<sup>3</sup>

The Wyoming Association of Churches – which represents 9 member denominations, agrees that would-be immigrants face unacceptable dangers along the Mexican-U.S. border and hundreds die each year from exposure and thirst. Let's start at that point and work toward a solution that is workable and permanent: a solution that maintains the security of both borders; that improves economic and labor conditions in Mexico and elsewhere in Latin America so that people are no longer driven to risk their lives in order to provide safety and sustenance for their families.

Neither permanent security nor economic justice can be maintained by bigger police forces. Immigration reform should be based on a concern for our neighbors as well as for ourselves. If we want permanent security, it must be based on solutions that provide justice for all, or injustice will fester and threaten us all into future generations.

<sup>1</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church (2nd ed.)*. Washington, DC: Libreria Editrice Vaticana—United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2000, no. 2241.

<sup>2</sup> *National Council of Churches "Call for Comprehensive Reform" (March 2, 2006)*

<sup>3</sup> *Church World Services statement on Comprehensive Immigration Reform, (January 25, 2007)*