



Statement in Support of Comprehensive Immigration Reform¹

World Relief is actively engaged in advocating for comprehensive immigration reform in Congress. This document explains why we believe advocacy on this issue is important, and encourages other Evangelicals to support comprehensive immigration reform. World Relief has a long history of resettling refugees in the United States and providing immigration legal services, English classes, and other assistance to refugees and other immigrants. We are compelled to speak from our experience by engaging the Evangelical community on the issue of immigration reform.

How Can We Expand God's Kingdom by Accepting and Ministering to Immigrants?

The Bible commands us to welcome the stranger. Modern reality also requires us to embrace the immigrant population, many of whom are our brothers and sisters in Christ, and a growing force in the church. Through immigration, God is bringing citizens of many closed and un-reached countries into contact with American Christians. We therefore welcome the opportunity to share our faith with people who might otherwise have no opportunity to hear the Good News. The immigrant Evangelical church is growing rapidly in the U.S. and around the world. Among Evangelicals in the United States, “the fastest growing are found among the Independent immigrant churches. . . . In 20 years, African, Asian, and Latin American Evangelicals . . . will likely be at the forefront of . . . global movements as well as their manifestations in the USA.”²

In the Bible, God repeatedly calls us to show love and compassion to “aliens,” or immigrants. In Deuteronomy 10:18 – 19,³ we are told that “[God] defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing. And you are to love those who are aliens, for you yourselves were aliens in Egypt.” Leviticus 19:33-34 teaches us that, “[w]hen an alien lives with you in your land, do not mistreat him. The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the Lord your God.”

Love in the Christian tradition requires specific acts of care and respect. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus answers the question of “who is my neighbor?” with the parable of the Good Samaritan. (Luke 10:29-37) Part of what makes the Good Samaritan parable so compelling is that the Samaritan, who was a stranger or alien himself, was the one who stopped to help the Jewish man. This and other parables remind us that “we are all aliens sent out to help other aliens find a place of safety in this world.”⁴ God does not distinguish among arbitrary divisions such as country of origin. Instead, God desires to include all people in His Kingdom, for “[t]here is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:28)

¹ © World Relief, February 27, 2006. This statement may be reproduced and distributed, with attribution to World Relief. World Relief is the humanitarian arm of the National Association of Evangelicals USA. In the United States and 24 countries around the world, World Relief works with local churches to create sustainable solutions that help the desperately poor. World Relief's programs include refugee and immigrant assistance, disaster relief, AIDS ministries, community health, agricultural development and community banking.

² Dr. Todd M. Johnson, Center for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, “USA Evangelicals/evangelicals in Global Context: Trends and Statistics.”

³ All Scripture references are taken from The Holy Bible, New International Version.

⁴ Jonathan Robert Nelson, Remarks for The American Bar Association's, “Fortress America: The State and Future of U.S. Immigration Law and Policy,” held at the National Press Club, January 26, 2006.

Evangelicals recognize that, “[e]veryone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established.” (Romans 13:1) Therefore we support the importance of following and enforcing laws, while simultaneously recognizing that laws were created for the well-being of human beings and society. Ultimately the laws must answer to God’s higher law, which requires us to treat all human life with sanctity. All persons bear the image of Christ and thus should be treated with the dignity and respect that we would afford our Savior. Valuing persons includes doing what we can to preserve them, to care for them, and to create fair systems that lead to healthy societies.⁵ We must from time to time ask if our human-made laws create a just and better existence for those who are created in God's image.

Why Do Immigrants Come Here, and What Do They Do for Society?

We at World Relief have worked to serve refugees and other immigrants for many years, and have found that they contribute to our society in countless ways. Immigrants often fill jobs that native-born Americans do not fill, such as jobs that require hard labor but less education. There are also many immigrants in medical and technical fields. Immigrants are also helping to fill the gap left by an aging population that is leaving the workforce. Immigrants pay taxes, participate in our communities, churches, schools, and political systems. Immigrants are dedicated to their families, and are hard-working.

We know that some immigrants have violated immigration law by entering this country illegally or overstaying a valid visa, and there are many reasons why they have done so. They may have had to flee quickly to escape persecution, civil strife, or natural disasters in their own countries. Many others came to this country because they needed to support their families, who are from countries where they cannot earn a living wage. Many immigrants have applied legitimately for the right to live in this country with their family members, but must wait for many years for final approval due to backlogs in the system.

The Need for Comprehensive Immigration Reform

Immigration is a defining feature of America’s history and will continue to be an important issue for America’s future. President Bush, members of both parties in Congress, and the faith community have called for changes to our immigration system to address numerous problems.

World Relief believes that a comprehensive approach to immigration reform is required to address the complex and outmoded immigration system that currently exists. For example, current law has created numerous barriers for legitimate refugees abroad and seekers of asylum in the U.S. to receive the protection they deserve. Additionally, approximately eleven million “undocumented” immigrants currently live in the United States,⁶ and more than three million U.S. citizen children live in families headed by an undocumented immigrant.⁷ An “undocumented” individual does not have current permission to work or live in the U.S.

Many undocumented children are raised here but are unable to attend college or work legally. Individuals are risking their lives and literally dying to come to the United States. Families face inhumane waits of up to twenty years to reunify with family members. There are an inadequate number of visas for employers to hire the foreign workers necessary for jobs that they cannot find native-born Americans to fill. We have a growing black market characterized by widespread use of false documents, increasingly violent smuggling cartels, and exploitation of undocumented workers.

⁵ Evangelical Project for Public Engagement. National Association of Evangelicals, For the Health of the Nation: An Evangelical Call to Civic Responsibility, 8, 10 (2004).

⁶ <http://pewhispanic.org/files/reports/44.pdf>, stating that as of March 2005, there were nearly 11 million undocumented individuals in the U.S.

⁷ <http://pewhispanic.org/files/reports/46.pdf>.

Because many immigrants do not currently have a means by which to receive lawful status in the United States, they go undetected by living in the shadows. If they could apply for current lawful status, they would be much more likely to come forward, and the government could better target the small number of potential criminals and terrorists.

We do not condone any violations of the law, such as living in the United States illegally, but we recognize that our complex and inadequate immigration system has made it nearly impossible for many of the hard-working people that our country needs, to enter or remain in the country legally and/or reunite with family members.

What Are World Relief and Other Agencies Doing?

World Relief is actively advocating for comprehensive immigration reform at the federal level, cooperating with other faith-based agencies, and working to engage the Evangelical community. We approach comprehensive immigration reform as a non-partisan issue, in which we feel called to engage based upon Scripture and our moral values.

We believe that a comprehensive approach is required that goes beyond border protection alone and addresses the current problems of our immigration system, by looking at root causes of immigration, developing workable solutions, and providing dignified relief to the millions of immigrants who are contributing to our communities, despite their lack of legal status. We also advocate for reforms that better protect those seeking refugee and asylum status.

We advocate that any legislation that is passed include the following specific principles:

- Reforms in our family-based immigration system to significantly reduce waiting times for separated families who currently wait many years to be reunited;
- The creation of more responsive legal avenues for workers and their families who wish to migrate to the U.S. to enter our country and work in a safe, legal, and orderly manner that prevents their exploitation and assures them due process;
- The option for those individuals and families who are already living in the U.S. and working hard, to apply for permanent legal status and citizenship if they choose to do so, by meeting specific application criteria; and
- Border protection policies that are consistent with humanitarian values and with the need to treat all individuals with respect, while allowing the authorities to carry out the critical task of enforcing our laws.

What Can You Do? A Call to Action.

- Ask your church and/or Pastor to sign the attached letter to the President and Congress, in support of comprehensive immigration reform.
- Call or send a letter or e-mail to the President, your Senators and Representative, in support of comprehensive immigration reform. (See www.whitehouse.gov/contact/; www.senate.gov/; www.house.gov/writerep/.)
- Schedule an appointment with your Senator or Representative, or with their staff.
- Talk about immigrants and refugees in your church.
- Volunteer with a local refugee or immigration program, such as a World Relief office.
- Contact World Relief for more information.⁸

⁸ For more information, please contact Jenny Hwang, Advocacy Coordinator, at World Relief, 7 E. Baltimore Street, Baltimore, MD 21202; 443-451-1969; immigration@wr.org; or see www.worldrelief.org.