

*Engage!* Immigration

# As the Citizen Among Us Loving the Immigrant as Ourselves

by Rebecca Baik



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With special thanks to M. Daniel Carroll Rodas, PhD, Distinguished Professor of Old Testament at Denver Seminary, for his invaluable feedback on this project.

## ***Engage! Immigration***

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*Engage!* is a series of resources designed to help churches understand and interact with difficult issues.

Also in the series:

*Engage!* Racial Reconciliation

*Engage!* Holistic Ministry Toolkit

([EvangelicalsforSocialAction.org](http://EvangelicalsforSocialAction.org))

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## INTRODUCTION

For a country that prides itself on its immigrant past, on welcoming those “huddled masses yearning to breathe free,” the United States as a whole is surprisingly—and persistently—xenophobic. Every new ethnic or national group that arrives on our shores is greeted with trepidation and discrimination and often with outright racism. The first major piece of national immigration law was the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. From the Irish and German immigrants arriving in the mid-19th century to the Latin American and Muslim immigration of today, we have separated ourselves from newcomers, defining ourselves by their “otherness” and predicting their arrival as a precursor to the fall of US culture and civilization.<sup>1</sup>

Undocumented immigrants<sup>2</sup> are particularly subject to this distinction. As not only cultural but also legal “others,” they are easily targeted as scapegoats, blamed for anything from a failing economy to high taxes to increases in crime. Generally speaking, any mention of unauthorized immigration can bring out the worst in us—nationalism, a hardened and hostile heart toward the immigrant, and, most of all, a judgmental insistence on our own rights as citizens. But discussions of unauthorized immigration that launch from one of these points tend to be unproductive. As Christians we are called to view other human beings not through the lens of national or cultural allegiances but through our allegiance to God. The purpose of this study guide is to start the discussion from the reality that immigrants (authorized or otherwise) are human beings made in the image of God.

This is the perspective that broke in on me some time ago and completely redefined the way that I view immigrants. I come from a rural area where the few immigrants that were present when I was growing up were not readily visible and where I was never forced to consider the issue of immigration, even in the abstract. Seven years ago, however, I embarked on a short missions trip to Mexico with other American Baptist young adults. While there, we visited an indigenous community that welcomed us warmly, showing us hospitality and offering Christian love. By acting as our Lord would towards strangers and foreigners, they reflected the image of God for us. After about three days, they began to share with us their own stories—stories of relatives and friends who had risked their lives to reach the United States, who were now being exploited in low-paying jobs and were permanently separated from the families they had left in order to support them.

Those stories remain with me to this day. Every time I visit Mexico, I undergo a similar experience, which has taught me that some things are more important than legality, more important than “getting what you deserve.” Grace is more important. Grace reflects the image and the

heart of God.

As you work through this study guide, absorb the readings, and explore your own thoughts and beliefs through the suggested activities, I urge you to extend grace by seeking to understand, rather than condemn, our undocumented brothers and sisters.

### A word about using this study guide:

This study provides material for seven gatherings, and each gathering features the following:

1. A stated goal
2. A Bible study, reflecting on a particular passage
3. A “Bearing witness” section, which includes one or more excerpts from an immigrant’s story or an article about immigration
4. Teaching
5. Discussion questions (with spaces for taking notes)
6. Closing prayer
7. Activity (most of these can be done at any point in the session and can be a good way to shift gears if your group appears to need a break or change focus)
8. “Take It Home” suggestions of activities participants can do on their own during the week to deepen and personalize the learning process.

We encourage you to engage with the material at the speed and depth that feel right for you. If a lesson yields an unusual amount of discussion, allow it to spill over to the next week, if your schedule allows. Depending on the time allotted for your meeting, you can read the “Bearing witness” sections aloud together, or assign them to be read ahead of time each week. Do the suggested activities if you have time, but if you eliminate them, be aware that any group will contain some people who learn best through hands-on, multi-media, and/or interactive activities. So if that is not your particular bent, you will want to ask how the others feel about eliminating those opportunities for learning. A quick discussion at the beginning of the study about expectations and learning styles will likely yield some helpful tips on how to make the most of this time with your particular group.

We use the Common English Bible translation in this study guide. The CEB uses the word “immigrant” for what is generally translated, in most other versions, as “alien,” “resident alien,” “foreigner,” “stranger,” and “sojourner.”<sup>3</sup>



Photographs from the Georgia Latino Alliance for Human Rights (GLAHR.org), courtesy of National Day Laborer Organizing Network (NDLON.org)

## Resource List

(Referred to and excerpted from throughout this study guide, these resources can be accessed on the ESA website at [EvangelicalsforSocialAction.org/immigration-guide](http://EvangelicalsforSocialAction.org/immigration-guide))

“America, You Must Be Born Again!” by Stephen Pavey

“Fight the Bed Mandate” by Maria-José Soerens

“Go and Do Likewise” by Todd L. Lake

“A Hunger Strike, Detention, and the Bread of Life” by Maria-José Soerens

“The Immigration Debate: Can the Bible Help?” by M. Daniel Carroll Rodas

“Immigration Has a Name” by Elizabeth D. Rios

“Is Immigration Reform Just Another Way of Saying ‘Amnesty?’” by Ronald J. Sider

“It’s Time, Mr. President” by Linda Espenshade

“Mother of Exiles” by Matthew Soerens and Jenny Hwang

“Out of the Shadows and Into the Light” by Stephen Pavey

“Privileged, Prepared, and Powerless” by Craig Keener

“The Story of a People on the Move” by Todd Svano

“Taking Up the Case of the Stranger” by Luis Cortés and Meredith Rapkin

“Tomato Justice” by Tim Høiland

“What Latino Immigrants Have Taught Me About My Citizenship” by Todd Svano

“What They Bring” by M. Daniel Carroll Rodas

## Week 1: Immigration and the Bible

### GOAL

To begin to understand the context of how foreigners are mentioned and understood within the Bible and the special place immigrants have within God's heart.

### Bible study

<sup>26</sup> Then God said, "Let us make humanity in our image to resemble us so that they may take charge of the fish of the sea, the birds in the sky, the livestock, all the earth, and all the crawling things on earth."<sup>27</sup> God created humanity in God's own image, in the divine image God created them, male and female God created them. <sup>28</sup> God blessed them and said to them, "Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and master it. Take charge of the fish of the sea, the birds in the sky, and everything crawling on the ground."

Genesis 1:26-28

Of all the creatures God made, humankind is the only species said to be made in God's image. One interpretation of what it means to be created in God's image is that just relationships reflect the Trinity—that we are made to live in equality, interdependence, and community. If we all carry the image of God within us, whatever we do to another person we also do to the image within them. When we honor a human being, we honor the image of God within that person. How would we treat immigrants if we remembered that they, like us, are bearers of God's image, equally precious to the God we worship and follow?

### Bearing witness

Immigration is about people, and the Bible emphatically affirms that people have value in the sight of God. Genesis 1:26-28 states that all human beings are made in the image of God. This passage makes clear that humans have a mind, will, emotions, and a spiritual side; all of us can share in the rule of God as God's servants. Each person—including the immigrant—has worth and the unique potential to contribute to society and the common good. This is where discussions on immigration must start. Appreciating newcomers as made in the image of God would eliminate the heated rhetoric and unfortunate labeling that is widespread in the media. It would

motivate those who claim to be Christians to treat immigrants with dignity, respect, and kindness. The fact that millions of those who have arrived in this country are Christians and part of the family of God underscores even more the necessity of looking at these people differently than do many in the majority culture...

Concern for the sojourner makes sense against the background of ancient realities. In the agrarian world of the Old Testament, most people lived in villages and small towns. These often were composed of extended families, so kin were available for support in times of need. Outsiders had no such safety net and encouragement. This situation also meant that they were excluded from the land tenure system, where property was passed down from father to son. Therefore, they were dependent on the Israelites for work, sustenance, and protection. The law took this precarious situation into account and offered several measures to counterbalance sojourners' deficits.

- These workers were to be granted rest (Exodus 20:10; Deuteronomy 5:14) and paid a fair and timely wage (Deuteronomy 24:14-15).
- There were provisions for food (Deuteronomy 14:28-29; 24:19-21) and the demand for impartial dealings in the law courts (Deuteronomy 1:16-17; 24:17-18).
- These outsiders also were invited to participate in several of the religious feasts. This is significant, because faithful observance was at the core of Israel's cultural identity, and this would require that the foreigner learn the ways and language of Israel.
- The prophets denounced those who mistreated the sojourner (Jeremiah 7:5-7; 22:2-5; Malachi 3:5) and looked to the day when their incorporation into national life would be even greater (Ezekiel 47:21-23; cf. Isaiah 56:1-8)

(From "The Immigration Debate: Can the Bible Help?" by M. Daniel Carroll Rodas)



These words written on the primary border fence at Playas in Tijuana, Mexico, read: "This is a great wound for [our] humanity. We have been broken in two." (Photo by Mayra Picos-Lee)

## Teaching

It would be easy, in a cursory reading of the Bible, to assume that it had a rather xenophobic view of foreigners. After all, the people of Israel were commanded to despoil, wage war against, and avoid contact with those Canaanites and other ethnic groups living among them. Doesn't this fit in, one might ask, with US nationalistic fervor and the fear that immigrants corrupt our national values?

Yet, overwhelmingly, the image of immigrants within the Bible is a positive one. As Dr. Carroll points out in the excerpt above, this was in part due to the status of immigrants within Israelite society. Along with widows, orphans, and the poor, immigrants were inherently economically and socially vulnerable, and so safeguards were put in place within the law to ensure that they were treated fairly. Indeed, as Carroll also points out, the prophets themselves chastised Israel and Judah not only for their idolatry, but also for their treatment of the poor—and immigrants in particular: “The important people of the land have practiced extortion and have committed robbery. They’ve oppressed the poor and mistreated the immigrant. They’ve oppressed and denied justice” (Ezek. 22:29). In part because of their treatment of immigrants, the Israelites were torn from their own country, becoming exiles in a foreign land.

Jesus spends much of his ministry denouncing mistreatment of the poor, outcasts, orphans, and widows—groups that are vulnerable in so many ways, just as foreigners are. As Carroll and others have pointed out, a case can also be made that Jesus himself experienced life as a foreigner. As a baby, he and his parents fled Bethlehem as political refugees to Egypt. As an adult, he lived in Galilee, a region that (according to Virgilio Elizondo<sup>4</sup>) was essentially a borderland between Jewish and Gentile cultures. Spiritually he was the ultimate foreigner—the divine God who entered into human flesh, assumed human culture, but never fully belonged or assimilated. In the end, he was crucified at the hands of a foreign empire.

In Ephesians 2:12-14, Paul writes:

At that time you were without Christ. You were aliens rather than citizens of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of God’s promise. In this world you had no hope and no God. But now, thanks to Christ Jesus, you who once were so far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. Christ is our peace. He made both Jews and Gentiles into one group. With his body, he broke down the barrier of hatred that divided us.


This reminds us that, where we were once outsiders without hope, we are now citizens of God’s covenant and reign.


Conversely, 1 Peter 2:11 and other similar texts remind us that we are now “immigrants and strangers” within the world. Our allegiance is now to God rather than to human structures or systems. As Christians we are uniquely suited to understand the emotional and social turmoil of the immigrant experience. Not only are we commanded to protect immigrants, but we are also told to identify with them. God loves and protects the oppressed, including immigrants (Deuteronomy 10:17-19).

Which side of the immigration debate do we honestly think God is on? On the side of power and might, or on the side of those who are mistreated? Consider what would happen if we began by focusing on immigrants’ humanity rather than their legal status, their value before God rather than our fears of the other, and their potential to contribute to the common good rather than the challenges they present. How might the tone and direction of the national debate, as well as our personal interactions with immigrants, change?


### ACTIVITY

Watch “The Secrets of Strangers” ([tinyurl.com/nndy5mv](https://tinyurl.com/nndy5mv)), a brief video that shows meetings between pairs of strangers, one of whom is undocumented. Then discuss the following questions:

 What do you think the undocumented immigrants are feeling before they share their secret? Why do you think that?

 What are they feeling as they are sharing their secret? Watch their body language. How about afterwards?

 What is required of the listeners? How do they respond?

 How do you define hospitality? Where do you see hospitality portrayed in the Bible? In what ways do these listeners offer hospitality to the undocumented immigrants?

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What does the phrase “made in the image of God” mean to you? How does it affect the way you view others? What does this suggest about the way that all humans, including immigrants, should be treated?
2. Why do you think so many laws concerning the fair treatment of foreigners were included in the Old Testament? What does this say about the way God views foreigners and sojourners? What rights and support do you believe that all immigrants today, regardless of legal status, deserve to be granted? (Here are a few to consider: fair wages, work breaks, and fair dealing within the court system, help with language and cultural accommodations. What would you add to, or subtract from, this list?)
3. Discuss the various ways that Jesus himself was often in the position of foreigner, outsider, or exile. How might this affect the way you view immigrants in your own community? What can you learn from today’s immigrants and their experiences that might help you draw closer to Christ?

 **PRAYER**

Almighty God, we know that you have a special love for the vulnerable, including immigrants. Help us to reflect that care and concern in our own relationships. God, we thank you for sending your child down to earth as an immigrant and a foreigner, who was rejected by those in power. Help us to treat the immigrants among us as we would Christ himself. Amen.

 **TAKE IT HOME**

Read through and meditate on “The Immigrant’s Creed” on page 27. What stands out to you? How does this illuminate or change what you believe as a church and how you interact with immigrants in your own community?

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## Week 2: Causes of Immigration

### GOAL

To consider a shift in our perspective—from understanding immigration as a problem to understanding it as a symptom of larger issues, including US foreign policy decisions.

### Bible study

*When a famine struck the land, Abram went down toward Egypt to live as an immigrant since the famine was so severe in the land.*

Genesis 12:10

Abraham received his call from God and left behind his family and his home in order to reach the land that God had promised him. Once there, he encountered a famine so great that he, his family, and his livestock are unable to survive without a foray into Egypt. This pattern of famine and flight is repeated often throughout the Old Testament. Joseph's brothers went into Egypt during a time of famine in order to buy food. Naomi and her family fled to Moab during a time of famine in Israel. Throughout the Bible, Israelites and others facing harsh economic circumstances beyond their control throw themselves upon the mercy of foreign nations. Their stories and experiences became an important part of the identity of God's people.

Today many immigrants face changing economic climates, violence, or natural disasters in their home countries. They are faced with a choice: to immigrate, perhaps without authorization, or to suffer. What would Abraham have done?

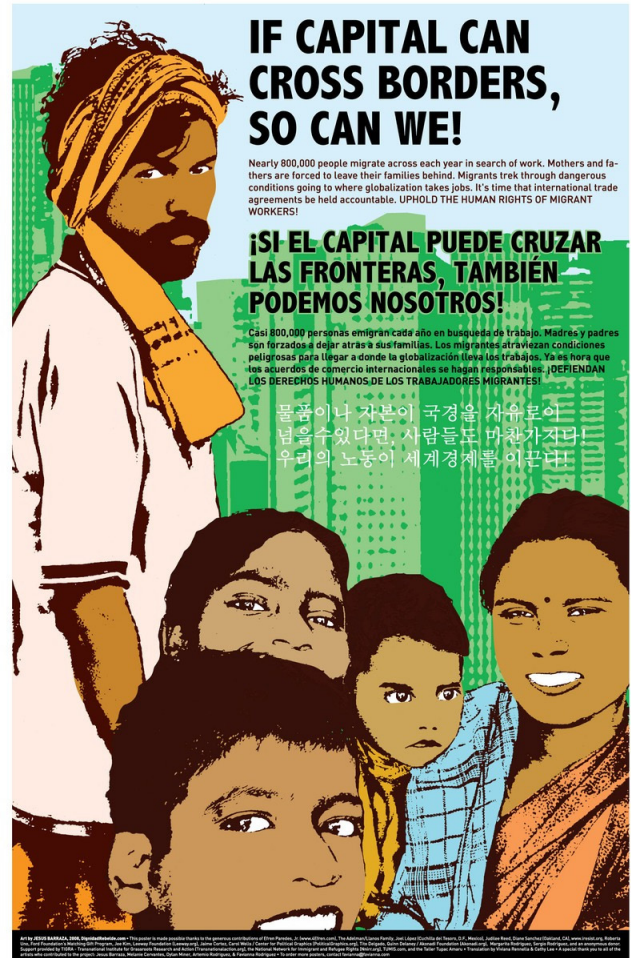
(Do the activity below before reading "Bearing witness.")

### Bearing witness

Years ago the Hernandez family's ice cream parlor in Mexico City appeared to be doing well. But in reality, soaring utility bills forced them to scrounge for food and clothes left on curbs in wealthier neighborhoods. The Hernandez family felt especially deprived of two "capacities" that Americans take as basic rights—education and healthcare.

Mexico spends only \$1,656 per student on education, one-third of the \$5,450 average for the 30 countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and public subsidies to health providers are a mere \$662 per year for each Mexican, compared to the \$2,500 OECD average.

The Hernandez family's brightest hope, their son, Fernando, embodies the tough and often ironic choices of so many transborder families. An "A" student, Fernando was already studying at a Mexican university at age 16. "He could



(Poster by Jesus Barraza for DignidadRebelde.com)

have become a lawyer," said his mother.

The combination of Fernando's costly bronchitis treatment and his hopes for better educational opportunities convinced his parents to emigrate with him, leaving three daughters behind whom they planned to send for eventually. In doing so, however, they amassed \$7,000 in debt to coyotes for safe passage: Fernando presented fake papers at a checkpoint; Mrs. Hernandez used a false visa and came by a conventional airline; and Mr. Hernandez fled through the desert on foot.

There was one obvious hitch to this plan: Fernando knew no English. "He learned enough to get along in a Minneapolis public school," said Mrs. Hernandez. But the adjustment, especially for a teenager, was still difficult. "He was embarrassed that other students were better dressed," she said, "and

### ACTIVITY

- 📌 On a whiteboard or large piece of paper, jot down all the words that come to mind when you hear the word "immigrant."
- 📌 How many of the words evoke negative images? How many are positive?
- 📌 How many evoke the internal qualities of an individual? How many refer to outside forces exerted upon the individual?

he needed to work to help us survive and to send for his sisters.”

Six years later Mr. and Mrs. Hernandez have missed much of their daughters’ childhoods, Mr. Hernandez’s painting business doesn’t earn enough to cover their mortgage and utilities, and their three-bedroom home does not even meet their needs, said Mrs. Hernandez, who has had two more children since arriving in the US.

Fernando finally dropped out of school and worked at a carwash, and Mrs. Hernandez admits the move wasted Fernando’s talent. “He’d have been better off at a Mexican university. If I had known then what I know now, I never would have come.”

(From “The Story of a People on the Move” by Todd Svano)

### Teaching

Immigration is often portrayed as the root cause of many of the issues currently facing the US, especially the working poor. However, it would be simplistic to accept this analysis without in turn exploring the reasons for immigration and for unauthorized immigration in particular. Why do immigrants come? What makes them leave behind homes, families, and cultures to confront such daunting challenges in a foreign place and language? Why do immigrants choose to cross without authorization? If we truly listen for the answers to these questions, they will give us a much better understanding of the immigration phenomena here in the United States.

Certainly the United States is a nation of immigrants. From our very founding we have received immigrants who came for various reasons and met with varying degrees of acceptance. One of the most obvious reasons for immigration is economic. Many immigrants, such as the Hernandez family, simply lack the economic or educational opportunities they wish for, and they come to the US lured by the promise of better wages and opportunities. Although this may seem a personal, individual decision, it is not. Thousands of families have made a similar journey in the past decade, to the point where many villages in the south of Mexico are bereft of all but the elderly and small children. Their migration was fueled not by personal failure but by changing economic climates.

Almost two decades ago, Mexico (urged by her rather demanding neighbor to the north) entered into a period of increased liberalization.

National industries were privatized. Communal lands were sold off, often to private foreign companies. Most crucially, Mexico signed the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which, among other things, opened up that country as a market for US goods, including agricultural commodities such as corn. Mass-produced and subsidized US corn started to flood into Mexico, destroying the ability of small farmers to sell their own crops. Many simply gave up and migrated to Mexican border towns, where US investment was already increasing the presence of factories known as *maquilas*—plants that assemble US-made parts and clothing and then ship them back across the border to sell in US markets. Conditions in most maquilas are dangerous, whether from the presence of toxins or from sexual harassment at the hands of management.<sup>5</sup> And wages are so low that recent migrants can spend as much as a third of their daily wages on bus fare to and from work.<sup>6</sup> Is it any wonder that thousands of them, already torn from their homes and communities, still unable to provide for themselves and their families, and only miles from a land of seeming prosperity, eventually turn their eyes further north?

Immigration is not a freestanding problem; it is a symptom of a variety of interlocking deeper problems, which also are global. Migrations have been occurring for thousands of years, due to a variety of global and local factors. While it may not be the primary cause of migration, US foreign policy has certainly exacerbated the conditions and created pathways that have led to increased immigration. One of these pathways is poverty; another is colonization. It is no coincidence that many of the countries that send a high number of immigrants to the United States (China and India being the exception) have been the subjects of past US military campaigns. This includes Mexico, the Philippines, South Korea, Vietnam, Haiti, and much of Central and South America.<sup>7</sup> Some of these countries were colonized outright by the United States, while others were the sites of US military aggressions. Others have simply been the target of US economic power and neoliberal policies.

Whatever the means of colonization, part of its function was to set up social networks and ties between countries—and also to exploit regions for their resources and flaunt the power of the colonizer. The *bracero* program (1942-1964) recruited thousands of Mexican workers. Other programs have recruited thousands of nurses from the Philippines. Global migration will always be a reality. Yet we should be attentive to ways in which our own actions as a country have increased poverty, instability, and other ills that factor into immigration.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Go back to the free-association exercise you did at the beginning of this session. Much of the media coverage surrounding unauthorized immigration portrays it as the result of individual disregard for the law rather than systemic issues such as poverty, instability, or violence. Has reading about the Hernandez family and the above discussion about the effect of US policies influenced the way you view immigration? If so, how?
2. What do you think of the idea that the US is complicit at some level in creating the conditions that have led to large-scale immigration from certain countries? If you can see the validity of this assertion, what do we do with the widespread tendency in this country to blame and criminalize immigrants?
3. Much of the Old and New Testaments describe the special way in which the people of God should regard and help the poor. Considering that many immigrants migrate for economic reasons, should the church give them a similar preference? If so, what might that look like?

 **PRAYER**

God, we ask for your protection for immigrant families who are driven from their homes by war, conflict, or lack of opportunity. We confess our own complicity in structures and systems that have deprived them of the ability to survive in their own homelands. We look forward to the justice of your reign, in which none will have to make the hard decisions that immigrants now have to make. Amen.

 **TAKE IT HOME**

Research your own family history: When, from where, and why did your family immigrate to the United States (unless your family happens to be Native American)? How does your family's immigration story compare to the narratives of modern-day immigrants?

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## Week 3: A Broken System

### GOAL

To begin to understand the effects of the current immigration system on immigrants and their families.

### Bible study

*You must be holy, because I, the Lord your God, am holy.*

Leviticus 19:2

<sup>17</sup> *You must not hate your fellow Israelite in your heart. . . .* <sup>18</sup> *You must not take revenge nor hold a grudge against any of your people; instead, you must love your neighbor as yourself; I am the Lord.*

Leviticus 19:17-18

<sup>33</sup> *When immigrants live in your land with you, you must not cheat them.*

<sup>34</sup> *Any immigrant who lives with you must be treated as if they were one of your citizens. You must love them as yourself, because you were immigrants in the land of Egypt; I am the Lord your God.*

Leviticus 19:33-34

A list of seemingly unrelated commands, Leviticus 19 begins with the simple admonishment “You must be holy, because I, the Lord your God, am holy.” It goes on to issue a call to love one’s neighbor, which in its particular context meant a fellow Israelite. This same language is picked up a bit later in the chapter, when the concept of neighbor is extended to the outsider (typically the hardest neighbors to love, because they are different). Jesus refers to this command in his parable of the Good Samaritan (as we’ll see in Week 7).

Why is love of foreigners a precondition for holiness? Quite simply, it was a way for Israelites to remember their own mistreatment in Egypt. It was also a justice issue. As the Israelites’ time in Egypt shows, foreigners in the Middle East were particularly vulnerable, which is why immigrants are often grouped with the poor, widows, and orphans. In a land-based economy and clan-based culture, immigrants typically lacked both land and family. It would have been all too easy for the local population to take advantage of them, a fact reflected elsewhere in the Torah, where Israelites are commanded not to withhold wages or justice from foreigners (see Deuteronomy 27:19).

For legal or linguistic reasons, today’s immigrants often find themselves in similarly vulnerable situations, denied their rights by employers, lawyers, landlords, and even school systems. What would it look like if we, as a nation, stopped taking advantage of immigrants and learned to love them as ourselves?



Ryan Rodrick Beller / Shutterstock.com

### Bearing witness #1

In October 2006, while traveling between Arizona and Mexico as missionaries, Araceli and her husband, Daniel, a US citizen, had their lives turned upside down. Although her US visa was valid for another four years, border patrol police detained her without stating a reason. She was handcuffed and put in a jail cell for nine hours, during which time she was refused both water and food, in spite of the fact that she was eight-and-a-half-months pregnant with their third child. Then she was deported to Mexico.

(From “Immigration Has a Name” by Elizabeth D. Rios)

### Bearing witness #2

When my grandfather passed away, my dad couldn’t visit because of his undocumented status. When my grandma became paralyzed, my dad also couldn’t visit.

My dad opened his heart one night and told me those are the times he really can’t endure, despite all the other times he works his 70-hour-a-week job.

There is no end to sad stories. My mom wanted to learn English at a community college so badly that she risked quitting her job that makes her ankles swollen all the time. I was

### ACTIVITY

Think of a time when you felt you had no choice, or when you had several choices but none of them was appealing. These can be difficult relational, economic, or ethical choices: staying in an abusive relationship vs. losing the social network/security/identity that came with that relationship; paying for medicine you needed vs. paying for food; keeping a secret shared with you in confidence or using that information to protect someone in danger.

These are very personal and likely very painful stories, but if anyone in the group is willing to share, he or she should be free to do so. Whether or not details of individual stories are shared, discuss how it felt to have such unappealing or limited choices. Some people in the group may not have (or be able to identify) such a story from their own experience, but they can listen to the others and ask questions to deepen their understanding.

so proud of her for taking the risks. But again, being undocumented and not having the choice of where to work put her back at work and away from the community college.

Most of the times, I try not to think about these things, because it's hard to function normally when I remember them. But sadly this is the reality for me, my family, and [almost] 12 million undocumented people in America, and I am righteously angry and resentful of all the people who think we need to demand change "strategically" while compromising all our values and demands to bureaucracy.

While I'm as public as I am about my undocumented status, I don't talk about sad things often, even with my closest friends, because it hurts me. It haunts me even after I stop talking about it.

— Jessica Hyejin Lee

(From "America, You Must Be Born Again!" by Stephen Pavey)

### Bearing witness #3

The detention of migrants ... is legally supported by Congress under the "bed mandate," which stipulates that the Department of Human Services (DHS) "shall maintain a level of not less than 34,000 detention beds..." There is wide agreement within government agencies that the mandate is arbitrary; it does not follow actual detention needs, and that level of incarceration is vastly excessive. This mandate was introduced into the 2010 DHS appropriations bill by the late Senator Robert Byrd (D-WV) without public comment, and the quota has increased each year since it was first introduced...

Under the bed mandate, ICE is obliged to incarcerate migrants who do not pose a threat to public safety. As a consequence, families are torn apart. Parents, pregnant women, and children, many of them asylum seekers and victims of violence, are incarcerated indefinitely in privately run prisons that put a price tag on immigrants' lives.

Incarceration is excessively costly for taxpayers and profitable for corporations. ICE spends \$160 a day per detainee, while alternatives to detention cost between \$0.07 and \$17 per day. The GEO Group, ICE's contractor, has seen revenues triple since 2002.


(From "Fight the Bed Mandate" by Maria-José Soerens)

### Teaching

There is an immigration crisis in our country. Although it is usually described in numbers—over 11 million undocumented residents, over 400,000 deported a year—this crisis is best understood in terms of the people whose lives are affected, and the families that are separated due to the confusion and backlog of the current immigration system. Even those who are able to immigrate legally are often forced to wait years, even decades, for loved ones to join them here in the United States.

Undocumented immigrants face their own unique set of challenges. Many of them make the decision to cross into the United States out of desperation, seeking a way to provide for their families. And while they might find employment in the US, their legal status makes them targets for mistreatment and often denies them access to basic rights and services, whether by landlords, school officials, or employers. They also face police departments in some cities that are increasingly engaging in racial profiling and immigration enforcement in collaboration with US Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

In addition to these factors, undocumented immigrants are unable to visit the family and friends at home for whom they made the journey in the first place. Each year over 400,000 immigrants are also separated from family within the United States because of detention and deportation. Some are expelled from the country for seemingly no reason at all, while others are guilty of nothing more than small traffic violations. Approximately 5,000 children are currently in the US foster care system because their parents or guardians have been deported. Whatever your views on current immigration policies and quotas, it cannot be denied that they have exposed immigrants to degrading and dehumanizing situations, including the separation of families. The US immigration system is broken, and more than 11 million lives hang in the balance.

 **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. Think of your own personal views on unauthorized immigration. What has influenced these views? Personal experience? The media? Church teachings? Do any of these influences reflect an awareness of the everyday realities of undocumented immigrants? If not, what can you do to make yourself aware of local immigrants and their stories?
2. The immigration debate within the church often reflects tension between a need to uplift the marginalized and oppressed and a desire to follow the law. Read Matthew 12:1-14. What do you think Jesus would say about laws that disregard human dignity and well-being?
3. Consider the choices available to immigrants. Consider the choices available to the US government. Consider the implications of the "bed mandate" mentioned in "Bearing witness #3" above. How could our government exercise better choices when it comes to how it deals with undocumented immigrants? If you were in charge, how would you want to use the \$160 that is currently being spent per day per detainee, which is currently benefiting a private corporation? What alternatives to detention, which cost between 7 cents and \$17 per day per detainee, can you imagine, and how might those alternatives be better for both the country and its immigrant population? How might the government reform the current system to make it more efficient and humane?
4. What is your church's or tradition's stance on immigration? What seem to be its key foci or emphases? What does this reveal about your tradition's priorities and faith?

## PRAYER

God, creator of all people, we ask your guidance as we seek to understand our immigration system and the effect it has on immigrants and their families. God, we confess that we as a country have treated immigrants in a way that ignores their worth as people made in your image. Help us to see immigrants as you see them—as beloved individuals, as your children. Give us wisdom during these next few weeks as we seek to discern your will. Amen.

## TAKE IT HOME

Ask one or two immigrants you know about their own story, particularly about what has been most challenging. Alternatively, visit a website such as Inside Out 11 M ([InsideOutProject.net/11M](http://InsideOutProject.net/11M)) to see what the “faces” of undocumented immigration look like in your part of the country.

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## Week 4: Immigration and Marginalization

### GOAL

To connect the reality of modern-day immigrants with the call of Christians to stand in solidarity with the marginalized and oppressed.

### Bible study

<sup>14</sup> Don't take advantage of poor or needy workers, whether they are fellow Israelites or immigrants who live in your land or your cities. <sup>15</sup> Pay them their salary the same day, before the sun sets, because they are poor, and their very life depends on that pay, and so they don't cry out against you to the Lord. That would make you guilty. . . . <sup>17</sup> Don't obstruct the legal rights of an immigrant or orphan. Don't take a widow's coat as pledge for a loan. <sup>18</sup> Remember how you were a slave in Egypt but how the Lord your God saved you from that. That's why I'm commanding you to do this thing.

Deuteronomy 24:14-15; 17-18

Throughout the Bible, God evinces concern for the marginalized and oppressed. After all, God did not call apart for special blessing the prosperous and powerful nation of Egypt but, instead, their slaves. Many of the commands for the Israelites to care for the widow, the orphan, and the foreigner are accompanied by a reminder of how God once delivered them out of Egypt. Just as God redeemed them from their suffering as slaves, so they are expected to come to the aid of others, offering fair and prompt wages and providing just treatment. Foreigners were not given special protection because of any special quality in and of themselves but because of their very powerlessness. Influenced by these and other verses, many Christians today affirm God's call to solidarity with the poor, with those suffering from racial discrimination, and other disenfranchised groups. They should add to that the call to welcome foreigners, who often suffer poverty and discrimination in addition to legal statuses that often leave them vulnerable.

### Bearing witness #1

Like many farmworkers, 21-year-old Wilson Perez came to Immokalee, Fla., to provide for his family back home in Guatemala. On a typical day, he gets up at 4 a.m. and makes his way to a parking lot in town where he and hundreds of others wait for work for the day. Able-bodied men between the ages of 18 and 40 are often selected, but, as Perez says, even so “you have to continue to have good luck and be hired back day after day.” On good days, Perez is selected by a crew leader and taken to the field where he and his fellow day laborers will pick tomatoes. It is often 10 or 11 a.m. before work begins, and the pay doesn't kick in until the workers start picking. Moving row after row, hunched low to the ground, Perez fills his 32-pound bucket. When it's full, he hoists it onto his shoulder and carries it hurriedly to a waiting truck, which may be 100 feet or more away. Then he gets back to where he left off and continues picking. This is repeated bucket after bucket, hour after hour, day after day. Farmworkers like Perez are typically paid 50 cents per bucket, a rate that has remained stagnant for three decades. In fact, taking inflation into account, today's pay is only half of what it was then. A single worker needs to pick 2.5 tons of tomatoes every single day just to earn minimum wage.

(From “Tomato Justice” by Tim Høiland)

### Bearing witness #2

Drawing from James Baldwin and the black-led struggles for freedom, Marcos Saavedra does several things for us. He connects immigrant justice to other forms of oppression both historically and in the present. He helps us to see the intersectionality of all struggles for freedom. But he further disturbs us, asking us to consider whether civil rights were won with compromises at the cost of justice and freedom. Baldwin and Saavedra suggest that the problem before us is not the problem of the n\*\*\*\*r or the “illegal,” but rather why a nation and a people invented the concept of a n\*\*\*\*r or an “illegal” person. Saavedra asks, “If I'm not illegal, what does that make you?” The use of “illegal” then becomes “more an indictment than an identity.” This is a more fundamental problem of power, or access to power, that severely limits freedom and justice rather than a problem of immigrant or civil rights. Saavedra updates Baldwin:

What white people have to do is try to find out in their own hearts why it was necessary to have a n\*\*\*\*r (ILLEGAL) in the first place. Because I'm not a n\*\*\*\*r (ILLEGAL), I am a man (HUMAN), but if you think I'm a n\*\*\*\*r (ILLEGAL), it means you need it... If I'm not a n\*\*\*\*r (ILLEGAL) here, and if you invented him (you, the white people, invented him), then you've got to figure out why. And the future of the country depends on that.

(From “America, You Must Be Born Again!” by Stephen Pavey)

### Teaching

One of the central themes of the Bible, as we have seen, is God's concern for the marginalized. The Israelites were commanded to treat fairly, even give special treatment to, those who were socially and economically vulnerable. Most of us recognize this message in God's command to protect the widow, orphan, and the poor, but we often leave out the fourth category—the stranger or alien. In ancient Israel, a society built on family categories of tribes and clans that would protect and sometimes avenge their members, foreigners were bereft of such protection. Even land was parceled out on the basis of family ties, meaning that it was very difficult for foreigners to own property and were thus economically vulnerable as well. Although US society is radically different from that of ancient Israel, the vulnerability of immigrants remains much the same.



Ryan Rodrick Beiler / Shutterstock.com



## ACTIVITY

The cartoon on the left shows how Irish immigrants to the US were depicted in the 1800s (view more cartoons at [tinyurl.com/ntrv6r7](http://tinyurl.com/ntrv6r7)).

- 👉 What do these depictions tell us about the Irish?
- 👉 What do they tell us about the cultural climate of the day?
- 👉 What similarities do you see between how Irish immigrants were viewed back then and how Hispanic immigrants are viewed today?

During the Irish Potato Famine of 1845-1852, one million Irish fled their country. The 500,000 who came to the US were for the most part poor and uneducated, and they also represented the first major influx of Roman Catholicism to the US, which many American Protestants considered dangerous and foreign.

Just as “one man’s meat is another man’s poison,” one generation’s immigrant is another generation’s “true” American. Discuss other people groups from past generations that were once considered a threat but today are accepted as fully integrated citizens. What immigrant groups incite the most fear in US citizens today, in terms of bringing in a “foreign” religion? Who might future generations consider to be a threat?

Watch the following very brief clips from the PBS series *Faces of America*: “A Colony of Aliens” ([tinyurl.com/pxjavej](http://tinyurl.com/pxjavej)), which discusses Benjamin Franklin’s disapproval of German immigrants, and “Who’s White?” ([tinyurl.com/pxy35yj](http://tinyurl.com/pxy35yj)), which looks at race as a determining factor in the history of US immigration.

Immigrants are marginalized in a variety of ways. Many (although definitely not all) undocumented immigrants were already marginalized within their communities and countries of origin (one thinks in particular of indigenous communities in Mexico). The sole fact that they crossed an international border without papers also subjects them to various forms of dehumanization within the United States. Their lack of legal status leaves them inherently vulnerable to those who would take advantage of them, whether employers, landlords, or school officials.

Due to their lack of papers, many are unable to work at any but the most menial jobs. Many, like Wilson Perez, become migrant farmworkers, receiving much less than minimum wage for backbreaking and dangerous work. Undocumented immigrants are denied all but the most basic of services—public education, emergency medical care, and access to law enforcement. Even the latter is debatable, however. Recent programs such as Secure Communities and 287(g) have led to increased collaboration between Immigration and Customs Enforcement and local police, leaving immigrants more distrustful of law enforcement and thus more vulnerable than ever to violent crime. And this is to say nothing of the linguistic and cultural barriers that all immigrants—regardless of legal status—face.

Of course, in a society that prides itself on fairness and human rights, it is necessary to come up with some kind of rationalization as to why there are people in our communities who remain on the margins. Too often, we as a nation project our anxieties and concerns onto other nations or peoples, including undocumented immigrants, marginalizing them as scapegoats. Some mainstream media conglomerates ensure that undocumented immigrants fulfill this stereotyped role within our national narrative. The message is simple: *Yes, these people may not have all the rights we do, but it’s their own fault. They’re lawbreakers, criminals, drug-dealers, mothers of anchor-babies, people who leech off the system. It’s their fault that we have crime, that our economy is sluggish, and taxes are so high. They’re “illegals.” Their entire existence is an illegality. So, no matter how we use them and exploit them, we need feel no guilt. Because it’s essentially their fault.*

The term “illegal” helps sustain a negative view of undocumented immigrants that dehumanizes and marginalizes them in a way that disregards them as humans made in the image of God. These are the “strangers and aliens” of today—immigrants who are denied basic economic opportunities as well as social protections—people very similar to the foreigners God commanded the Israelites to care for thousands of years ago. The US church cannot follow its call to stand in solidarity with the marginalized until it truly addresses the needs of undocumented workers here in our own country.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. When was the last time you felt taken advantage of or unfairly targeted? What effect did it have on you? What if that situation were not just a local, one-time incident but an ongoing pattern of oppression? How would that affect your self-esteem, your relationships, and your basic ability to function?
2. Think back to the times when, for whatever reason, you have been negatively labeled. What effect did that label have on you? How do you think it makes immigrants feel when they are labeled “illegals,” “criminals,” or other negative epithets?
3. What do you think should be the church’s response to the marginalized? Which, if any, marginalized groups does your church family engage with or minister to? How does the marginalization of undocumented immigrants relate to these other forms of marginalization?



 **PRAYER**

God, creator of all human beings, forgive us when we label and marginalize your children. Open our eyes to our own privilege, to the ways in which we benefit from the exclusion of others. Protect the immigrants among us who suffer from discrimination and dehumanizing conditions. Amen.

 **TAKE IT HOME**

Go to your local supermarket and notice the price of produce, especially tomatoes. Try to visualize the process it took to grow, harvest, and transport those vegetables. An estimated 60-plus percent of migrant farmworkers in the United States are undocumented. Over the next week, each time you eat produce, say a prayer of thanks and support for the many immigrants who, like Wilson Perez, are forced to work in dehumanizing conditions, providing us with the food we enjoy.

Visit the website of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers ([CIW-online.org](http://CIW-online.org)), an organization that fights to protect the rights of migrant workers in Florida's tomato fields. Check to see if they have a chapter near you. Alternatively, see what other migrant or immigrant rights organizations do exist in your community. Ask them what their greatest needs are currently. Ask to be added to their mailing list so that you can stay informed.

## Week 5: Laws

### GOAL

To begin to understand the ways in which laws here in the United States not only perpetuate but also encourage undocumented immigration.

### Bible study

*<sup>1</sup>Doom to those who pronounce wicked decrees, and keep writing harmful laws <sup>2</sup>to deprive the needy of their rights and to rob the poor among my people of justice; to make widows their loot; to steal from orphans!*

Isaiah 10:1-2

Many Christians view compliance with the law as godly witness to the world, as an act of obedience to Romans 13:1—“Every person should place themselves under the authority of the government. There isn’t any authority unless it comes from God, and the authorities that are there have been put in place by God.” Yet what happens when the laws of the governing authorities are unjust? Isaiah condemns rulers who enforce unjust laws in order to profit from the vulnerable. Although he does not mention foreigners specifically in the above text, he mentions those typically grouped with foreigners—widows, the poor, orphans—in other words, those with the least power. Isaiah argues for a higher standard that trumps mere human laws, especially laws that exploit. That standard is the justice of God, a God who actively mediates for the vulnerable. Yes, undocumented immigrants have broken the laws of the United States. But has the US itself broken God’s higher laws by exploiting those immigrants and denying them their rights and refusing to help them in their need?

### Bearing witness #1

We were determined, no matter what the risks, to try to help my wife’s 7-year-old niece, Keren. ... Like her father, a professor, Keren was smart; she was working at two grades above her age level, and she learned English words as quickly as I could teach them. Yet she was living now with just one parent in Brazzaville, Congo, one of the world’s most dangerous and least healthy cities. Some of my in-laws had nearly died of malaria there, and Keren had often been dangerously ill. Multiple sources informed us of roving gangs raping girls, and at this time various circumstances gave us good reason to believe that Keren’s life was in danger. ...

On this third trip to the consulate, we had hundreds of people praying for our success. Keren believed that God would grant her the visa, and her faith encouraged the rest of us. ...

### ACTIVITY

Take a look at “What Part of Legal Immigration Don’t You Understand?” ([tinyurl.com/2ebvfvo](http://tinyurl.com/2ebvfvo)). Review your own family’s immigration history from Week 2. If your ancestors were immigrating today, would they be allowed into the United States? Calculate how long it would take them to immigrate today. Compare what each person found and discuss as a group.

Stephen Pavey



Several months of preparation would culminate in a few brief moments before the vice-consul. She asked us several questions until she found one useful for rejecting our petition. ... My concern is less with the laws, however, than with compassion and truth. Legally the vice-consul could make whatever decision she wanted. But what moral purpose does it serve to bar our 7-year-old niece from the country where we are living? All the objections people raise against immigration were irrelevant in her case: She was not a potential terrorist, not illegal, and not a burden on society; we had legally obligated ourselves to cover every aspect of her support. Some may object that everyone would like to bring their relatives here, but Keren is the only one we have tried to bring, because of her special circumstances. Because we have had a series of miscarriages, we cannot be accused of contributing to overpopulation.

The harshest critics of immigration might finally suggest that if we want to be a family together so much, we should simply emigrate. That is an option we have discussed; however, due to my linguistic deficiencies, Congo itself would not be a likely destination. Devastated but unwilling to give up, we waited two years and applied again. This time the consulate, now in Brazzaville, was courteous and noted that all our papers were in order. Nevertheless, they refused the visa. ... At the time this article goes to press, Keren is 10 years old, staying with her father, whose job requires him to be away from her for many hours each day. The most direct original danger has apparently passed, though new threats arise periodically; in any case, life remains much less secure in Brazzaville than in the States; Keren’s father was wounded by robbers as this article went to press. The Congo region has the world’s highest incidence of rape, and we want to make life better for her. If US immigration policy makes this impossible, am I wrong to ask why the policy is written and implemented in this way? Spoiled with our many “rights” in this country, I never imagined that what initially and instinctively seemed a matter of course—to be able to take in a child who is a relative—would be denied us.

(From “Privileged, Prepared, and Powerless” by Craig Keener)

## Bearing witness #2

Many in our society—including many in our churches—view today’s immigrants with a degree of wariness and, in some cases, outright hostility. Much of that hostility centers on the question of legal status. Many resonate with the idea that immigration “ought to be done the legal way, just like my ancestors did.” In reality, the migration situation today parallels other points in US history in many ways: Immigrants continue to come, principally, for economic reasons and, secondarily, to be reunited with family or to find the freedoms that we enjoy in the United States. Throughout the history of the United States, arriving immigrants have been welcomed by some and simultaneously resented and blamed for societal problems by others. The rhetoric that we hear today from Lou Dobbs or Bill O’Reilly on cable news sounds rather similar to statements that Benjamin Franklin made centuries ago about German immigrants to what was then the British colony of Pennsylvania. What has changed substantially—the reason that so many people today do not show up the legal, way—is immigration policy. **Quite simply, many of our ancestors immigrated “the legal way” because, prior to the 1880s, there was no illegal way to immigrate:** There were no federal restrictions on who could immigrate, and there was no requirement of a visa to enter. . . .

Recent debate around immigration has revolved around border security and immigration enforcement measures, where immigration raids and increased immigrant detention have been used to enforce immigration laws already on the books and deter further illegal immigration. The United States has doubled border security over the past decade, but illegal immigration has only increased since then. While border security is necessary for the United States to regulate who comes in and goes out of the country, border security is not an immigration policy. A fundamental flaw in our current legal system is that **there is no mechanism for many would-be migrants, particularly those coming to do “unskilled” labor, to obtain a visa to enter the United States legally,** even though employers are eager to hire them when they arrive. A maximum of 10,000 permanent resident visas per year are available for low-skilled workers with an employer sponsor, a number that falls far short of the demand. New legal avenues through which immigrants can enter the United States are necessary to relieve pressure at the border and allow our border agents to target their efforts on those who intend to harm our country rather than those who are seeking gainful employment in the United States.

(From “Mother of Exiles” by Matthew Soerens and Jenny Hwang)

## Teaching

Many US citizens today express their view on immigration along the following lines: “I don’t have anything against immigrants; I just don’t know why people have to break the law.” If made by a Christian, this statement might be accompanied by a quote from Romans 13 or one of the other few verses in the Bible that suggest that believers should respect the governing authorities.

This question of legality may seem simple at first, but in reality it is hugely complex. In the first place, the fact that we are called as Christians to respect government does not mean that we blindly accept everything our government does; in fact, some of the same people who interpret Romans 13 in a very legalistic way when it comes to immigration take a very different

stance when it comes to the government’s ruling on abortion, for example. As people of faith, we hold that we have not only the right but also the duty to struggle against laws that we find to be unjust, whether the Jim Crow laws of 50 years ago or what some have dubbed the Juan Crow laws of today. If we do find current immigration laws to be unjust and hopelessly outdated, then we can hardly fault immigrants for breaking them, and we should do everything we can to make sure that those laws are eventually overturned. One of the benefits that we enjoy in our democracy is that we actually can change laws and create new ones that can be better morally grounded and more efficient.

Any discussion of the justice of immigration law must begin by harking back to Week 2 and our discussion of the causes of immigration. Remember that, through foreign policy, colonization, and neoliberal trade agreements, the US has created many of the conditions that have led immigrants to leave their homes of origin. We must also realize the many ways in which we as citizens benefit from the presence of an economic underclass. Our food is grown, our houses are built, and our children are cared for by many thousands of undocumented immigrants who are often laboring in harsh conditions and/or for criminally low wages. Quite simply, we as a nation have contributed to the conditions for unauthorized immigration, because it is in our interest to be able to exploit these workers. Undocumented workers may break the law individually (although unlawful presence is actually not a felony, but a civil offense), but we as a nation have fostered a broader system of exploitation that is morally and spiritually unjust.

Still the question remains: “Why don’t they come legally?” The answer is surprisingly simple: “There is no way to do so.” For the thousands of “unskilled,” uneducated potential immigrants who have no immediate family members in the United States, there is no line to get into. This is due to the hopelessly outdated structure of the visa system itself. Only around 170,000 permanent residency visas are allotted per year, and in general—apart from visas awarded by random lottery and those granted to refugees and victims of human trafficking or violent crime—there are only two ways to receive them.

Immigrants with close family members (parents, children, siblings) with US citizenship or permanent residency can apply. Unfortunately, because there are a limited number of visas allowed per year, and no country can receive more than 7 percent, backlogs are extremely long. This is especially true for countries such as Mexico, the Philippines, China, and India, which have a much larger pool of applicants. It can take up to 20 years for a US citizen to sponsor a sibling from the Philippines. Even spouses, who are not subject to quotas, often wait two or three years simply for their visas to get processed. These backlogs sometimes lead family members to immigrate without authorization.

The other way to obtain a visa (besides investing over \$1 million in the US economy) is by employer sponsorship, which is generally only available to “professional” workers—those with advanced degrees, preferably from US colleges or universities (keeping in mind that H2A and H2B visas are nonpermanent). Even that by itself is not enough. Applicants have to find an employer who is willing to navigate red tape, and they must pay a significant amount in fees and wait a number of years for a visa to become available. Even if sponsors are willing to undergo this process, they have to prove to Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) that they cannot find any US citizen who can do the same work. This entire process is essentially based on chance; it is so difficult that even the best-qualified workers may not be successful, let alone those workers who, because of poverty, have the greatest need to immigrate.

This is the situation facing the vast majority of people who, through no fault of their own, feel they have no choice but to leave their homeland. Family or community networks and job availability lead them to immigrate to



## Week 6: Grace

### GOAL

To gain an understanding of the connection between the political concept of amnesty for undocumented immigrants and the biblical concept of grace.

### Bible study

<sup>36</sup> Be compassionate just as your Father is compassionate. <sup>37</sup> “Don’t judge, and you won’t be judged. Don’t condemn, and you won’t be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven.

Luke 6:36-37

<sup>23</sup> Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. <sup>24</sup> When he began to settle accounts, they brought to him a servant who owed him ten thousand bags of gold. <sup>25</sup> Because the servant didn’t have enough to pay it back, the master ordered that he should be sold, along with his wife and children and everything he had, and that the proceeds should be used as payment. <sup>26</sup> But the servant fell down, kneeled before him, and said, ‘Please, be patient with me, and I’ll pay you back.’ <sup>27</sup> The master had compassion on that servant, released him, and forgave the loan.

<sup>28</sup> “When that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him one hundred coins. He grabbed him around the throat and said, ‘Pay me back what you owe me.’

<sup>29</sup> “Then his fellow servant fell down and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I’ll pay you back.’ <sup>30</sup> But he refused. Instead, he threw him into prison until he paid back his debt.

<sup>31</sup> “When his fellow servants saw what happened, they were deeply offended. They came and told their master all that happened. <sup>32</sup> His master called the first servant and said, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you appealed to me. <sup>33</sup> Shouldn’t you also have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?’ <sup>34</sup> His master was furious and handed him over to the guard responsible for punishing prisoners, until he had paid the whole debt.

<sup>35</sup> “My heavenly Father will also do the same to you if you don’t forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

Matthew 18: 23-35

Too often, we humans tend to stand upon our entitlements, things we think we deserve, based on something we are or have done. In these verses Jesus reminds us that those rights are ultimately meaningless. Everything we have—whether economic success, relationships, even our very lives—is only lent to us through the grace of God. Should we as Christians judge undocumented immigrants for breaking unjust and outdated laws, especially when we know in our hearts that we have committed far greater sins? Which is worse—to break human laws in order to survive or to sin by hating or judging our neighbors? Would it not be better to work to change the laws to better reflect God’s heart?

### Bearing witness #1

As Christians, Rev. Joel Hunter suggests, we need to focus on redemption. Certainly people who break the law need to pay a penalty, but people jump to conclusions when they think the penalty is to go back to their home countries, he says. “Many of us in our own walk didn’t have to go back to square one when we did wrong. God redeemed us from where we were,” Hunter says.

(From “It’s Time, Mr. President” by Linda Espenshade)



Poster by Rommy Torrico, courtesy of National Day Laborer Organizing Network (NDLON.org)

### Bearing witness #2

The legal definition of amnesty, according to Webster’s dictionary, is “a general pardon of offenses against a government.” Undocumented immigrants have clearly broken the law. True amnesty would grant them total, unconditional pardon without having to pay any price. It is perfectly clear that this is not what is being proposed. ... Precisely to the extent that we want our Christian faith to shape our views on immigration, we will search the Scriptures for guidance on how to treat immigrants. ... Again and again, the Old Testament links aliens/immigrants with two other vulnerable groups, widows and orphans, and commands Israel to have a special concern for them all. ... Furthermore, millions of these illegal immigrants are sisters and brothers in Christ. ... Does all this mean we ought to grant amnesty—a full unconditional pardon—to illegal immigrants? After all, God totally forgives sinners who repent, offering them unconditional pardon through the cross. But the church is not the state. The state rightly requires that persons pay a penalty for breaking the law. ... Amnesty is not the answer. Neither is trying to send all illegal immigrants back home.

(From “Is Immigration Reform Just Another Way of Saying ‘Amnesty?’” by Ron Sider)

### Bearing witness #3

We should not be blind to the fact that there will always be compromises when legislating for freedom and justice. Both parties are bargaining for reform based on uncompromising commitments to power brokers set on maintaining a broken political-economic system that ensures a particular power structure continues. So, yes, let's commit to fighting for immigrant rights, but let's also commit to the more difficult work of transforming America towards freedom and justice. Injustice and the lack of freedom in the US are rooted in a deeply pathological economic system, brokered by a political system, and morally sanctioned by a religious system—and it's an unholy alliance. America, you must be born again!

(From "America, You Must Be Born Again!" by Stephen Pavey)

### Teaching




If there is one word in the immigration debate that is taken out of context and twisted in order to scare and dissuade, it is "amnesty." No sooner does any member of Congress so much as discuss an immigration bill with the remotest possibility of a path to legal status than it is automatically dismissed and vilified as "amnesty." Never mind the fact that none of these bills or proposals actually offers a blanket pardon: All require undocumented immigrants to pass a rigorous number of requirements, including English proficiency, proof of having paid taxes, and a clean record (more difficult than you would think, considering racial profiling), to name just a few. The bipartisan Senate immigration bill considered in 2013 would have required unauthorized immigrants to wait at least a decade (and for immigration enforcement standards to have been met) before taking even the smallest of steps towards permanent legal status. But all this is really beside the point.

Notwithstanding Ron Sider's valid point, above, on the difference between the functions of the church and the state, we as Christians still have a unique voice to contribute to the immigration debate. One of the ways we can do this is through the concept of grace. On a personal level, we know that God's forgiveness of us means that we too should forgive others. Perhaps this does not easily translate into public policy on the political level. Yet it should at least take much of the vitriol and anger out of the debate. How can we as Christians hate undocumented immigrants for breaking human laws when we ourselves have broken God's law? (James 2:10). How can we stand on our rights and privileges as US citizens when, as Christians, we understand that everything we are and have is due to the grace and mercy of God?

### ACTIVITY

Grace is defined as undeserved favor. Think of a time when you were forgiven a debt or escaped a well-deserved punishment because of someone's kindness. Perhaps it was a police officer who let you off with a warning instead of writing you a ticket for a red light you ran. Perhaps it was a parent who paid off a school debt for you. Perhaps it was an employer who gave you a second (or third) chance after you made a significant error at work.

Swap stories among yourselves and list on a white board the answers to the following questions:

-  How did you react to receiving the grace that was extended to you?
-  What long-term effect did that grace have on you?
-  Have you ever extended that same kind of grace to another person?

However, a discussion of grace is, in many ways, beside the point. Throughout the past few weeks, we have explored the realities and causes of immigration and even a general view of immigration law. By this time, it should be apparent that unauthorized immigration is more complex than the simple breaking of a civil code. It has been at least partially caused by reckless and exploitative US foreign and economic policy, by free trade agreements, neoliberal policies, and by overt colonization. We have also seen how the US public and government both benefit unjustly from the presence of a permanent underclass within our country. This country also needs to show compassion to immigrants, who have fled natural disasters, violence, and impossible social and economic situations. These inescapable realities demand a moral and spiritual response, what Stephen Pavey refers to as our nation's need to "be born again."

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What do you think of the argument that the grace of God, while a valid reference point for Christians in our personal lives, is not an apt metaphor for public policy? Think of other US institutions, such as the criminal justice system, with mandatory minimums and its high rate of recidivism. How might our country be different if, in immigration and other areas, we as a society offered a little more grace? What might be some concrete ways to inject grace into the immigration debate and into immigration legislation?
2. How is your perspective on unauthorized immigration and "amnesty" affected when you learn the ways in which we as a country have contributed to, and in some cases created, the problem? Is it accurate to label a long, detailed process to obtain legal status "amnesty"?
3. What are some ways that you personally can show grace to those in the immigrant community? What are some ways you could receive, or have received, grace from them in return? How can unauthorized immigrants be shown grace at a policy level?

Which is worse—to break human laws in order to survive or to sin by hating or judging our neighbors? Would it not be better to work to change the laws to better reflect God's heart?

 **PRAYER**

God, we confess to you that this issue of immigration is more complex than what we were taught or cared to believe. We ask your forgiveness for the ways in which we as a country have exploited immigrant labor. We also ask that you help us to forgive our immigrant brothers and sisters if we have any cause for anger. In the name of the Parent, Child, and Holy Spirit, Amen.

 **TAKE IT HOME**

Set aside some time to journal about the times you have been offered forgiveness by someone you have hurt. What transgression did you commit? Did it involve confession on your part? How was the forgiveness offered? How did you receive that person's forgiveness? Did you make restitution to that person in some way? Did you experience grace from that person? If so, what did that look and feel like?

Consider how you have experienced God's forgiveness and mercy through Christ.

How might your personal experience of forgiveness and grace inform your understanding of unauthorized immigration? What do you think an adequate response to unauthorized immigration would be?

## Week 7: Advocacy

### GOAL

To learn about ways in which you can join the struggle for immigration justice.

not permanent they are no substitute for comprehensive legislation.)

### Bible study

<sup>6</sup> *Isn't this the fast I choose:*

*releasing wicked restraints, untying the ropes of a yoke,  
setting free the mistreated,  
and breaking every yoke?*

<sup>7</sup> *Isn't it sharing your bread with the hungry  
and bringing the homeless poor into your house,  
covering the naked when you see them,  
and not hiding from your own family?*

<sup>8</sup> *Then your light will break out like the dawn,  
and you will be healed quickly.*

*Your own righteousness will walk before you,  
and the Lord's glory will be your rear guard.*

<sup>9</sup> *Then you will call, and the Lord will answer;  
you will cry for help, and God will say, "I'm here."*

*If you remove the yoke from among you,  
the finger-pointing, the wicked speech;*

<sup>10</sup> *if you open your heart to the hungry,  
and provide abundantly for those who are afflicted,  
your light will shine in the darkness,  
and your gloom will be like the noon.*

Isaiah 58:6-10

<sup>29</sup> *But the legal expert wanted to prove that he was right, so he said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"* <sup>30</sup> *Jesus replied, "A man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho. He encountered thieves, who stripped him naked, beat him up, and left him near death."* <sup>31</sup> *Now it just so happened that a priest was also going down the same road. When he saw the injured man, he crossed over to the other side of the road and went on his way.* <sup>32</sup> *Likewise, a Levite came by that spot, saw the injured man, and crossed over to the other side of the road and went on his way.* <sup>33</sup> *A Samaritan, who was on a journey, came to where the man was. But when he saw him, he was moved with compassion.* <sup>34</sup> *The Samaritan went to him and bandaged his wounds, tending them with oil and wine. Then he placed the wounded man on his own donkey, took him to an inn, and took care of him.* <sup>35</sup> *The next day, he took two full days' worth of wages and gave them to the innkeeper. He said, "Take care of him, and when I return, I will pay you back for any additional costs."* <sup>36</sup> *What do you think? Which one of these three was a neighbor to the man who encountered thieves?"* <sup>37</sup> *Then the legal expert said, "The one who demonstrated mercy toward him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."*

Luke 10:29-37

It is not enough to believe that we as Christians need to help the marginalized, including immigrants. We must act. The importance of this kind of action cannot be overstated. Isaiah relates it to spiritual practices such as fasting, noting that God does not accept a kind of false spirituality that allows for the exploitation, or even the neglect, of the vulnerable.

But Jesus turns the tables on who is needy and who can help provide for those needs when he tells the parable of the Good Samaritan. This story illustrates not so much how to love one's neighbor (with great mercy and

at great personal cost) but ultimately who our neighbor is. The neighbor we are invited to love (and admire and emulate!) in this story is the very group of people the Jewish people despised, and what's more, this despised person actually responds as God would want, thereby providing a moral example to the Jews, and in this particular instance, to a teacher of the law, who is hearing the parable in direct response to his query about who is worthy of his love!

If Jesus were telling this story today, he might depict an undocumented immigrant helping an injured and despairing politician, carrying him to the small apartment he shares with numerous family members, paying for bandages and food out of the meager pay he earns doing hard manual labor.



### ACTIVITY

Watch Lloyd Marcus' anti-immigration "Can't Afford the Sunshine" music video ([tinyurl.com/okz6w4e](http://tinyurl.com/okz6w4e)).

- 👉 What is the main message of this song?
- 👉 How are the various characters and their motives presented?
- 👉 What are immigrants blamed for?
- 👉 What are US citizens and/or the US held responsible for?
- 👉 What do you think the artist wants you to feel while you are listening to the song?
- 👉 What actions might result from these feelings?

Watch Aloe Blacc's "Wake Me Up" music video ([tinyurl.com/kbzpsa4](http://tinyurl.com/kbzpsa4)).

- 👉 What is the main message of this song?
- 👉 How are the various characters and their motives presented?
- 👉 What are immigrants blamed for?
- 👉 What are US citizens and/or the US held responsible for?
- 👉 What do you think the artist wants you to feel while you are listening to the song?
- 👉 What actions might result from these feelings?

(Be sure to read the bios of the actors featured in the Blacc video, which are listed below the video on the webpage.)



Even as we disdain today's Samaritans, the immigrants, many (although of course not all) of them epitomize the very values we hold as most dear—and most “American”—hard work, close family ties, and a faith that makes a difference (see “What They Bring” by M. Daniel Carroll Rodas on the website resource page). We are the man by the roadside, in need of help, while the despised immigrant is our true neighbor, the one who just might have the very thing we need. How can we not respond in kind? What form of action will that compassion take?

### Bearing witness #1

It is one thing to wring one's hands about the plight of undocumented immigrants but quite another to actually do something to help them. Since 1999, the United Methodist Committee on Relief has fostered the creation of a national network of legal aid ministries that provide high-quality free legal counseling and services. Known as Justice for Our Neighbors (JFON), this network also engages in advocacy work on issues of immigration, often in partnership with like-minded community organizations. . . .

The vulnerability of undocumented immigrants—and the all-too-common lack of a humane, measured response by authorities—made front-page news in Nashville when Juana Villegas was stopped for a minor traffic violation on the way to a prenatal visit to her doctor. She was arrested and taken to jail, where she began to have contractions. She was not allowed to let her husband or three children know that she was being taken to the local hospital, where she was cuffed to her bed. Two male police officers stood guard as she delivered a son; she was not permitted to take the nursing newborn with her back to the county jail upon her hospital discharge. It is situations like these that JFON wants to see redressed and reduced, but when they occur, JFON seeks to help immigrants understand and navigate the complex American legal system.

Potential clients call a phone number and in confidence tell a volunteer what kind of immigration issues they are facing. They are then invited to the next clinic, where they meet with a counselor and fill out a simple form detailing their situation. The clinics last three to five hours, with childcare and hospitality provided by church members. Clients then talk with an attorney who explains to them their options under the law and makes a commitment to work with them during the course of any future legal proceedings. This free legal work is worth an estimated \$10,000, an otherwise insurmountable barrier to justice for these poor, undocumented workers.

(From “Go and Do Likewise” by Todd L. Lake)

### Bearing witness #2

After several months in detention at the Northwest Detention Center (NWDC) in Tacoma, Wash., away from his wife and three children and subject to abusive treatment, Ramón Mendoza decided to fast to draw attention to the inhumane conditions of thousands of migrant detainees. Retaliation was quick to follow, and he spent 30 days in solitary confinement.

I asked him what he did all day in the “hole.”

“I read the Bible,” he responded.

“Why the Bible?” I asked.

“Because it resonated with what I was going through.”

“What part?”

“I read it all.”

Ramón told me how he prayed each night to ask God the next step for the following day. Sometimes he felt like giving up, but he found encouragement from Scripture at key times in his journey.

“By day 15, I was getting discouraged, not being able to communicate with anyone, and on top of that I wasn't eating. . . One feels, well, despair, and I read the part where Jesus fasted for 40 days, and that invited me to say, ‘I have fasted for 15 days, and I am complaining—he pulled it off for 40!’ That helped me keep going. Another reading I remember from those 30 days is when Jesus was taken to be crucified. He never, never objected to what was being done to him, and I was going through something similar in here, and that gave me peace. . . [the officers] do whatever they want with us, and unfortunately no one outside knows what happens in here. . . Those are but a few things that I realized by reading the Bible.”

(From “A Hunger Strike, Detention, and the Bread of Life” by Maria-José Soerens)

### Teaching

Over 50 years ago, in his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” Dr. King wrote the following words, which still ring true today:

I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Counciler or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to “order” than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: “I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action”; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a “more convenient season.” Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will.

As with African Americans, immigrants today live in an unjust and unacceptable system of oppression. They are exploited for their labor, vilified, scapegoated, denied basic rights and services, and live under constant threat of being separated from their loved ones. Now that you as a community of faith have educated yourselves about the conditions faced by the immigrant community, is silence still an option? As with the Civil Rights movement, the greatest threat to immigrant rights is not the bigot who chants racial slurs at protests or the armed vigilante who guards the border. It is the moderate US citizen, who believes in principle that the immigration system should be changed but does nothing to advance that reform. An estimated 71 percent of US citizens are in favor of some kind of legalization for undocumented immigrants. But if this 71 percent does nothing to express those views, little will get done.

Every major Protestant denomination, both mainline and evangelical, has published statements calling for immigration reform and for showing compassion to immigrants. If you and/or your faith community decide to take up the call to advocate for undocumented immigrants, there are two simple steps you can take to direct your efforts:

- Find out what advocacy is already taking place in your own community. Nationwide networks, such as the New Sanctuary Movement ([SanctuaryMovement.org](http://SanctuaryMovement.org)) and the Interfaith Coalition for Workers' Justice

(IWJ.org), have local chapters all across the country that you or your congregation could potentially partner with. In many communities there are also local organizations that have already spent years working with immigrant communities. How can you support the activism that even the most disempowered of them, like Ramón Mendoza and his hunger strike in detention (described in the “Bearing witness” section above), are doing?

- Even if you do not decide to officially partner with one of these groups, their feedback could still be extremely helpful for the second step, which is researching what needs exist in your community. Are immigrants in your community most in need of legal counsel? Emotional support? Medical services? English language classes? After-school tutoring of their children? Also, prayerfully decide as a community which needs you feel called to address. Do you want to minister to the short-term needs of the immigrant community or focus on long-term political advocacy? If political advocacy, do you want to focus on local or state anti-immigrant laws or push for reform on a national level? How much can you take on? Your involvement could be as simple as signing a few petitions or as involved as accompanying immigrants in deportation proceedings. There are almost unlimited ways for you and your church to get involved, based on your own context and the context of your community.

Whichever method of advocacy you adopt, do not forget that there is something unique that you, as a Christian or as a congregation, can offer to the immigration debate—your faith. So much of the immigration debate is either impersonal (discussed in terms of numerical data rather than people who have names/stories) or vitriolic and hateful. As people of faith, you can speak to the reality of immigrants who, like you, are made in the image of God, and of God’s special concern for them.

Finally, even in the midst of your advocacy, do not forget that the immigrants’ rights movement is for, and increasingly led by, immigrants themselves. Immigrant youth across the country are risking not only deportation but also their lives by carrying out sit-ins at government offices, “infiltrating” detention centers, and asking for asylum at the border. It is a privilege for US citizen “allies” to join the movement with them, not the other way around.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. What kind of advocacy or “mission work” do you as a faith community already carry out? Have these efforts already led to contact with immigrants? If not, is it possible to expand this work so that it reaches out to the immigrant community?
2. Which part of this study most moved you or caught your attention as a group? The legal piece? The economic exploitation of immigrants? How can you envision your advocacy speaking to or addressing that particular issue?
3. What kind of process do you need to go through in order to suggest a new “mission” or project to your church? Discuss these different steps and who can do what.
4. Does your church know of any immigrant congregations? What ways might you partner with these sisters and brothers in Christ to help those in need?

**PRAYER**

God of life, we thank you for the chance to see your presence and image in all human beings, regardless of immigration status. Give us strength and courage, not to speak for the voiceless but to hear the voices of our immigrant brothers and sisters and to join with them in the struggle for equality and freedom. Amen.

**TAKE IT HOME**

Look at “Taking Up the Case of the Stranger” by Luis Cortés and Meredith Rapkin on the website resource page. They list several practical ways that allies can help undocumented immigrants, including “Know Your Rights” cards (See Appendix B; cards can also be downloaded at the website resource page), emergency plans, and basic information on privacy rights and healthcare. With your faith group, consider whether or not you can commit to carrying out any of these suggestions within your own church or in the outside community.

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# Appendix A: The Immigrant's Creed

by Jose Luis Casals

I believe in Almighty God, who guided the people in exile and in exodus, the God of Joseph in Egypt and Daniel in Babylon, the God of foreigners and immigrants.

I believe in Jesus Christ, a displaced Galilean, who was born away from his people and his home, who fled his country with his parents when his life was in danger and, returning to his own country, suffered the oppression of the tyrant Pontius Pilate, the servant of a foreign power; he was then persecuted, beaten, and finally tortured, accused and condemned to death unjustly. But on the third day, this scorned Jesus rose from the dead, not as a foreigner but to offer us citizenship in heaven.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the eternal immigrant from God's kingdom among us, who speaks all languages, lives in all countries, and reunites all races.

I believe that the church is the secure home for the foreigner and for all believers who constitute it, who speak the same language and have the same purpose.

I believe that the Communion of the Saints begins when we accept the diversity of the saints.

I believe in the forgiveness, which makes us all equal, and in the reconciliation, which identifies us more than does race, language or nationality.

I believe that in the Resurrection God will unite us as one people in which all are distinct and all are alike at the same time.

Beyond this world, I believe in Life Eternal in which no one will be an immigrant but all will be citizens of God's kingdom, which will never end.

Amen.

*Jose Luis Casals is the Pastor and General Missioner of the Presbytery of Tres Rios in Midland, Tex., of the Presbyterian Church (USA).*



## Appendix B: Know Your Rights card

### Rights Card

I am giving you this card because I do not wish to speak to you or have any further contact with you. I choose to exercise my right to remain silent and to refuse to answer your questions. If you arrest me, I will continue to exercise my right to remain silent and to refuse to answer your questions. I want to speak with a lawyer before answering your questions.

I would like to contact a lawyer at this number

\_\_\_\_\_.

### Rights Card

I am giving you this card because I do not wish to speak to you or have any further contact with you. I choose to exercise my right to remain silent and to refuse to answer your questions. If you arrest me, I will continue to exercise my right to remain silent and to refuse to answer your questions. I want to speak with a lawyer before answering your questions.

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I would like to contact a lawyer at this number

\_\_\_\_\_.

## ENDNOTES

1. If you think this is an overstatement, check out “Huntington’s Clash Revisited” by David Brooks for the *New York Times* ([http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/04/opinion/04brooks.html?\\_r=2&](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/04/opinion/04brooks.html?_r=2&)) and “Central American Minors Are Gang Members, from ‘Culture of Murder,’ Says Congressman” at *Fox News Latino* (<http://latino.foxnews.com/latino/politics/2014/07/21/congressman-says-minors-who-have-crossed-us-mexico-border-are-gang-affiliated/>).
2. Throughout this study guide, the word “undocumented” is used to refer to immigrants with no legal status in this country. Although the term is not perfect (many unauthorized immigrants enter the country with documents, such as visitor visas, and then simply outstay them), it is at least better than the judgmental and inaccurate term “illegal immigrant.” A human being can perpetrate illegal acts, but no human being is illegal.
3. For an in-depth discussion on biblical terminology relating to immigration, see *Christians at the Border: Immigration, the Church, and the Bible* (second edition) by M. Daniel Carroll Rodas (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2013).
4. Virgilio Elizondo, *Galilean Journey: The Mexican-American Promise* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2000), loc. 1080-1139. Kindle edition.
5. Colectiva Feminista Binacional, “Sexual Harassment: A Maquila Reality” (Servicio Desarrollo y Paz, A.C. (SEDEPAC) & Comité de Obreras y Obreros en Lucha. <http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2021&context=globaldocs>
6. Monica Campbell, “Mexican workers struggle to find NAFTA benefits,” *Boston Globe*, October 10, 12, 2003. [http://www.boston.com/business/globe/articles/2003/10/12/mexican\\_workers\\_struggle\\_to\\_find\\_nafta\\_benefits/](http://www.boston.com/business/globe/articles/2003/10/12/mexican_workers_struggle_to_find_nafta_benefits/)
7. Aviva Chomsky: “*They Take Our Jobs!*” and *20 Other Myths About Immigration* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007), 121-132.

*Engage!*

Church resources from ESA | [EvangelicalsforSocialAction.org](https://EvangelicalsforSocialAction.org)