

HOW CAN WE HELP IMMIGRANTS?

A new church member—a recent African immigrant—described what his Christian mother taught him: “When someone comes to you and needs food and shelter, you give it to them. The next day you can ask them: What is your story?” The immigrant story touches every community and congregations have always welcomed newcomers. Typically, one in ten people attending a worship service in the US are immigrants—they were born outside the US. Further, one in five worshipers are children of immigrants because one or both of their parents were born in another country.¹

Do Labels Matter?

Conflating the categories of immigrant, migrant, and refugee reaps serious consequences for the health and safety of these newcomers. When considering issues related to the movement of people between countries, disagreement and confusion abound around the correct label. For the purposes of this issue, “immigrant” is the umbrella term for persons who moved from their country of birth to a new country. Migrants and refugees are terms for particular types of immigrants.

What is an immigrant? In the broadest terms, an immigrant is a person, born in one country, who chooses to make a home in another country. In most instances, they seek a better life with more opportunities—education or work—for themselves and their children. Because this is a planned choice, the individual or family is more likely to have saved funds, explored locations and jobs, and brought some necessary personal possessions. They may even have a network of family and friends who previously immigrated who are ready to assist them as they settle in a new country.

What is a refugee? Forced to leave their birth country, these individuals and families fear for their safety. In some cases, they risk their lives to escape a horrific situation such as torture, war, starvation, or violation of their human rights. Often they flee without much notice and leave behind almost all their possessions. Before arriving in a new country, they may spend time in an intermediary

country or a refugee camp, waiting for legal clearance to resettle in a host country. Refugees typically cannot return to their home country unless political and economic circumstances change dramatically. Recent crises provide a window into conflicts worldwide that have forced people to leave for a safe haven. The United States admitted 85,000 refugees in 2016 with the largest numbers coming from six countries: the Democratic Republic of Congo, Syria, Burma (Myanmar), Iraq, Somalia, and Bhutan.²

What is a migrant? People who seek work or educational opportunities for a limited amount of time are free to come and go between their home country and host country. Migrants include agricultural workers, students, educators, health care professionals, and a variety of other occupational groups.

For each category of immigrant, specific legal requirements and protections are in place. Confusing the groups takes attention away from the needs of these individuals and families. For example, international law defines “refugee” and spells out how they are to be protected. One



“DON'T FEEL BAD, LOU...
YOU'RE NOT THE ONLY ONE WHO THOUGHT EATING
LASAGNA AT THE CHURCH LUNCHEON
MADE US MULTICULTURAL.”

of the most crucial principles of international law is that refugees cannot be removed from the country providing asylum or returned to situations that might threaten their life. The appropriate legal response always depends on the individual's immigration status.³ Obtaining and processing the proper documents for legal status within the US is complicated, prolonged, and often expensive.

Will We Choose Welcome?

Whether an individual or group of church members wants to reach out to immigrants, they must do so with plenty of background information. Do we know the country of origin for immigrants currently in our community?⁴ Do we see ourselves as allies rather than the ones in charge? Are we paying attention to who is asking for what? Can we listen to newcomers' stories about their background and journey without pre-judgment? Can we learn about their dreams?

First, learn about local immigrant groups and existing non-profit organizations. Use "immigrant and refugee ministries" as search terms to discover services and agencies already assisting in your area (see <http://www.americanacc.org>). Search your judicatory and denominational websites for information and updates (e.g., <http://oga.pcusa.org/section/mid-council-ministries/immigration/>). Check out these additional resources:

- For worship resources: Church World Service founded by 17 denominations (<https://cwsglobal.org/our-work/refugees-and-immigrants/>)
- For ideas about how churches can help immigrant neighbors and fellow churchgoers: The Matthew 25 Movement (<http://matthew25pledge.com/toolkit/immigration>)
- For information about defending immigrant rights: American Friends Service Committee (<https://www.afsc.org/key-issues/issue/defending-immigrant-rights>)
- For laws, forms, and steps toward citizenship: US Citizenship and Immigration Services (<https://www.uscis.gov/humanitarian>)
- For access to finding assistance organizations near you: Catholic Charities USA (<https://catholiccharitiesusa.org/find-help>)
- For locating local legal assistance: Immigration Law Help (<https://www.immigrationlawhelp.org/>)

Second, let what you learn lead you to discern the next steps for yourself or the congregation. Most communities

already have organizations with decades of experience assisting immigrants. Consider volunteering with or donating to a reputable local or national group. Local agencies often need help with job networking, tutoring children or adults, or basic items (shelter, food, and clothing) in the early months of resettlement. Legislative advocacy and local organizing efforts are additional options for supporting immigrant rights. Recognize that some assistance comes with zero risk for the volunteer or organization. However, the degree of risk falls along a continuum from no legal risks to possible violation of US law (such as providing sanctuary to undocumented immigrants, refugees, and unskilled workers with temporary visas).⁵ Whatever actions you or others might take, should be done with eyes wide open.

Third, assess the opportunities or barriers for your congregation to be more multicultural. Many churches are already worshiping communities composed of multiple cultural groups. Unfortunately, the tendency is for the largest or dominant cultural group to believe that the minority cultures should give up their unique cultural identities and practices once they become part of the congregation. Finding points of commonality, such as children's education, support for families, or shared experiences in ministry with Christians in a sister church in another country, increases the chances of a congregation becoming more multicultural over time.⁶

From Africa to America

An African proverb says: "If you want to go fast, walk alone. If you want to go far, walk together." Responding to the complexity of immigrants' needs requires many, many caring partners and a long-term commitment.

1. Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce, *A Field Guide to U.S. Congregations*, Second Edition (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 19.

2. "Most refugees who enter the U.S. as religious minorities are Christians," Pew Research Center, (<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/02/07/most-refugees-who-enter-the-u-s-as-religious-minorities-are-christians/>).

3. See the Refugee Council USA, a coalition of twenty-four US-based, non-governmental organizations (<http://www.rcusa.org>).

4. Explore biblical texts and theological interpretations, such as Ched Myers and Matthew Colwell, *Our God is Undocumented: Biblical Faith and Immigrant Justice* (New York: Orbis Books, 2012).

5. "The roots and branches of the sanctuary movement," *The Christian Century*, February 15, 2017 (<https://www.christiancentury.org/article/roots-and-branches-sanctuary-movement>).

6. See "Multiple Roads to a Multicultural Congregation," *The Parish Paper*, Volume 24, Number 8 (August 2016).