

Immigration

by Bishop Peggy A. Johnson

I live in the United States of America because my ancestors immigrated from Denmark, the Island of Sky, Wales, Germany, and Cornwall, England. They came to make a better life for themselves and for me. This is the American story that continues to be lived out in the lives of today's new arrivals, both documented and undocumented people. There are an estimated 12 million to 14 million undocumented immigrants currently in the United States, 2 to 3 million of these are children. Immigration is not new, nor is the fact that many are undocumented. Most agree that the immigration laws are out-dated and are adding to the problems faced by immigrant families and their neighbors.

The General Conference of the United Methodist Church says: "We believe that the resources of creation are God's gifts for all people. We believe that as people of God we need to be open to others and welcome especially the sojourner in our midst. The United States of America prides itself as being open to ethnic diversity. However, United States citizens have not always held to that ideal. While some people have been welcomed, others have remained in the outskirts of United States cultural core and fabric. Furthermore, the reality is that with time U.S. borders have been getting narrower and often a spirit of hostility and racism toward the sojourner in the U.S. (i.e. refugees, immigrants, and visitors) has grown to the point of rejection and discrimination. We therefore call The United Methodist Church to call local churches to seek ways to welcome, assist, and empower the refugee, the immigrant, the visitor, and undocumented person in their neighborhood, and to denounce the persecution of the sojourner in the U.S. as prejudicial and racist; (and) to request the General Board of Church and Society to work for public policy that is hospitable to visitors to the United States of America." (2004 *Book of Resolutions*, "Refugees, Immigrants, and Visitors to the United States of America")

These vulnerable people are the "least of these" whom Jesus talks about in Matthew 25:37-38, 40. How we treat them is how we treat Christ. How we minister to their needs is a true expression of our worship of God. If we do not reach out to them in ministry, we are turning away from presence of God. The Bible says in Leviticus 19 NRSV "The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God." The Bible says we are to treat them with all the respect and care we would give our fellow citizens. Even more than that, we are called to love them as ourselves. This is in fact how Jesus calls us to treat every human being, even enemies.

I encourage you to open your minds, open your hearts, and open your doors for we do not know when we might be entertaining angels unaware. When I was in Seoul, Korea, I had the opportunity to worship with a very international church made up of many undocumented immigrants. In fact the basement of the church was made habitable for those who needed shelter. They even protected the ashes of those who died in their care until their families could claim their remains. This church was in ministry. Their pastor even went to jail from time to time because he dared to provide sanctuary for those in need. It is our holy calling to care for the stranger, this was true in the early church and it is still our calling today. Let us be the church.

Let us offer the love of Christ, who sacrificed his life for us while we were yet sinners.

Furthermore I encourage Christians to be gentle with our brothers and sisters with regards to our laws. States that have harsh immigration laws, such as the ones just passed in Arizona, that create racial profiling and extreme forms of interrogation do not reflect the spirit of Christ. Let us urge our lawmakers to find better ways to solve our immigration concerns and work for justice. When there is justice then everyone will have peace.