

## **Immigrants Seeking Asylum: What is Ours to Do?**

**Intro:** “Northern Triangle” is comprised of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. For background information on the issues behind the mass migration see, e.g., <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/crime-and-violence-central-americas-northern-triangle-how-us-policy-responses-are>

### **The Ethical Context**

Their countries of origin—primarily Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras— have failed to keep asylum seekers safe. I agree with Joseph H. Carens who pointedly argued in *The Ethics of Immigration*, “the arrival of the refugees implicates us directly and immediately in their fate. They will no longer be at great risk, if we do not return them.” He offered three types of reasons for a moral responsibility to admit refugees: causal, humanitarian, and the modern state system. In short, causal occurs when another nation has created a direct or indirect cause precipitating the migration; humanitarian is the connection that asylum seekers need a safe haven and the receiving country has the ability to provide it; and the current international state system is organized such that each person is “assigned” to a sovereign state, generally at birth. When the modern state system fails, as it does for asylum seekers, the other states then have an obligation to correct the “failures of a social institution” (p. 196).

### **Testimonies of *In*justice for the Asylum Seekers**

Consistent themes: “delinquency, extortion, much violence, fear, threatened with death, deaths, damage to oneself and to one’s children, much suffering, the police do nothing, and there is no safety or security.” “So much violence is unleashed over something as small as 50 cents.” Upon crossing the U.S./Mexico border, they turn themselves in to the U.S. Border Patrol and begin the long process to formally request asylum. One mother said “finding immigration was the easiest part of the trip.” Unfortunately many women describe their Border Patrol incarceration, in what the asylum-seekers call the “dog kennel” or “refrigerator,” as being the *worst* part of their journey. Rebecca Chopp has reminded us, “Testimonies enact a moral consciousness and communal, even at times, global responsibility” (Chopp, in *Converging on Culture*, 2001). In other words, we are called to respond.

The stories of these immigrants seeking asylum are testimonies of faith for they believe that God desires that, even though they “walk through the valley of the shadow of death,” they should “fear no evil” (Ps 23:5) because the God who created them in the “*imago Dei*” (Gen 1:27) desires for them to have “a hope and a future” (Jer 29:11). These incarcerated mothers and children seeking asylum remain confident that “if God is for us, who can be against us?” (Rom 8:31), and “if God began a work in me, God will see it to perfection” (Phil 1:6) because “all things are possible through Christ who strengthens me” (Phil 4:13). I came to understand their collective story as being a parallel paraphrase to Anselm’s “faith seeking understanding.” The asylum seekers’ knowledge of the living God awakens their “thirst and hunger for life” (2016, p. 23).

I believe our collective response must echo Martin Luther King, Jr.’s argument for the church regarding segregation when he insisted that the church must affirm “every human life is a reflection of divinity, and that every act of injustice mars and defaces the image of God in [humanity]” (*Chaos or Community*, p. 105). As King (1967, 2016) once said of segregation, the injustices and suffering which precipitates mass migration are “diametrically opposed to the undergirding philosophy of [the] Judeo-Christian heritage.” Consider the closing paragraph of King’s final book:

We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now . . . there is such a thing as being too late. Procrastination is still the thief of time (p. 105).

Ethicist Peter Kemp (1999): “It might be that, “in terms of function no one is indispensable, but as a person each and every one of us is irreplaceable” (p. 285).

#### *What is ours to Do?*

Sister Norma Pimentel once compared the experience of the South Texas migration crisis to that of people who have jumped from a burning building as she then asked, “Do we put them back into that burning building, or do we respond with humanitarian assistance?” They are already here. The question is how do we help? Gutiérrez (1987) used the cry of Job, “I will not keep silent” (Job 7:11), to show that those who suffer unjustly have a right to complain and protest (p. 90). Likewise, the *church* has the responsibility to complain and protest on their behalf. Perhaps one day in the future, instead of the two

(invisible) signs on the U.S./Mexico border that Jim Wallis (2016) said he imagined greeting immigrants: “No Trespassing” and “Help Wanted” (p. 142), there will be one visible sign which simply says “*Bienvenidos*, Welcome.”

### **Appendix A: Selected Resources<sup>1</sup>**

#### **Activist Organizations Sympathetic to Hispanic Immigration**

American’s Voice: <http://americasvoiceonline.org>

Border Links: [www.borderlinks.org](http://www.borderlinks.org)

Community Initiatives for Visiting Immigrants in Confinement (CIVIC): <http://www.endisolation.org/>

Coalition for Comprehensive Immigration Reform: [www.cirnow.org](http://www.cirnow.org)

Immigrant Solidarity Network: [www.immigrantsolidarity.org](http://www.immigrantsolidarity.org)

Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund: [www.maldef.org](http://www.maldef.org)

National Council of La Raza: [www.nclr.org](http://www.nclr.org)

National Immigration Forum: [www.immigrationforum.org](http://www.immigrationforum.org)

National Network for Immigration and Refugee Rights: [www.nnirr.org](http://www.nnirr.org)

No More Deaths: [www.nomoredeaths.org](http://www.nomoredeaths.org)

Refugee and Immigrant Center for Education and Legal Services (RAICES): [www.raicestexas.org](http://www.raicestexas.org)

#### **Religious Organizations and Coalitions**

American Baptist Churches: [http://abhms.org/justice\\_ministeries/immigration\\_and\\_refugee\\_services/](http://abhms.org/justice_ministeries/immigration_and_refugee_services/)

American Friends Services Committee: <https://afsc.org/project/immigrants-rights>

Christian Coalition of America: [www.cc.org](http://www.cc.org)

Christians for Comprehensive Immigration Reform: [www.cfcir.org](http://www.cfcir.org)

Esperanza USA: [www.esperanzaamerica.com](http://www.esperanzaamerica.com)

Evangelical Covenant Church: [www.covchurch.org/resolutions/2013-immigration](http://www.covchurch.org/resolutions/2013-immigration)

Evangelical Free Church: <http://immigranthope.org>

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<sup>1</sup> For an expansive listing of resources related to immigration research and advocacy see, e.g., Carroll, *Christians at the Border*, p. 142 ff.

Evangelical Immigration Table: <http://evangelicalimmigrationtable.com>

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America: [www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Resolutions/Comprehensive-Immigration-Reform.aspx](http://www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Resolutions/Comprehensive-Immigration-Reform.aspx)

Hispanic Coalition for Comprehensive Immigration Reform: [www.hispaniccoalitionforcir.com](http://www.hispaniccoalitionforcir.com)

Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod: [www.lcms.org/ctcr](http://www.lcms.org/ctcr)

Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services [www.lirs.org](http://www.lirs.org)

Mennonite Church USA: [www.mennoniteusa.org/executive-board/immigration](http://www.mennoniteusa.org/executive-board/immigration)

National Association of Evangelicals: [www.nae.net/government-relations/for-the-health-of-the-nation/human-rights/immigration-reform](http://www.nae.net/government-relations/for-the-health-of-the-nation/human-rights/immigration-reform)

National Council of Christian Churches: [www.churchworldservice.org/Immigration/](http://www.churchworldservice.org/Immigration/)

National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference: [www.nhclc.org](http://www.nhclc.org)

Presbyterian Church (USA): <http://org.pcusa.org/section/departments/immigration/>

Reformed Church of America: [www.rca.org/sslpage.aspx?pid=504](http://www.rca.org/sslpage.aspx?pid=504)

Sojourners Community: <http://sojo.net/topics/racial-and-social-justice/immigration>

Southern Baptist Convention: [www.sbc.net/resolutions/amResolution.asp?ID=1213](http://www.sbc.net/resolutions/amResolution.asp?ID=1213)

United Methodist Church:

[www.umc.org/site/c.lwL4KnN1LtH/b.7679333/k.6E87/The\\_Church\\_and\\_Immigration.htm](http://www.umc.org/site/c.lwL4KnN1LtH/b.7679333/k.6E87/The_Church_and_Immigration.htm)

United States Catholic Church:

Catholic Immigration Network, Inc.: <http://cliniclegal.org>

Conference of Catholic Bishops: [www.usccb.org/about/migration-and-refugee-services/](http://www.usccb.org/about/migration-and-refugee-services/)

## Appendix B: Definitions of Terms for Immigrant, Refugee and Asylee

### Immigrant

1. A person who comes to a country to take up permanent residence. merriam-webster.com
2. A person who leaves one country to settle permanently in another. thefreedictionary.com
3. A person who comes to a country where they were not born in order to settle there. vocabulary.com
4. Alien admitted to the United States as a lawful permanent resident. Permanent residents are also commonly referred to as immigrants; however, **the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) broadly defines an immigrant as any alien in the United States, except one legally admitted under specific nonimmigrant categories (INA section 101(a)(15))**. An illegal alien who entered the United States without inspection, for example, would be strictly defined as an immigrant under the INA but is not a permanent resident alien. Lawful permanent residents are legally accorded the privilege of residing permanently in the United States. They may be issued immigrant visas by the Department of State overseas or adjusted to permanent resident status by the Department of Homeland Security in the United States. dhs.gov

### Refugee

1. **Any person who is outside his or her country of nationality who is unable or unwilling to return to that country because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution.** Persecution or the fear thereof must be based on the alien's race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion. People with no nationality must generally be outside their country of last habitual residence to qualify as a refugee. Refugees are subject to ceilings by geographic area set annually by the President in consultation with Congress and are eligible to adjust to lawful permanent resident status after one year of continuous presence in the United States. dhs.gov
2. **Refugees** - Under United States law, a refugee is someone who:
  - Is located outside of the United States
  - Is of special humanitarian concern to the United States
  - Demonstrates that they were persecuted or fear persecution due to race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group
  - Is not firmly resettled in another country
  - Is admissible to the United States

#### **The Refugee Process**

- You must receive a referral to the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) for consideration as a refugee.
- If you receive a referral, you will receive help filling out your application and **then be interviewed abroad** by a USCIS officer who will determine whether you are eligible for refugee resettlement.

uscis.gov

### Asylee

An alien (**Any person not a citizen or national**) in the United States or at a port of entry who is **found to be unable or unwilling to return to his or her country of nationality, or to seek the protection of that country because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution**. Persecution or the fear thereof must be based on the alien's race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion. For persons with no nationality, the country of nationality is considered to be the country in which the alien last habitually resided. Asylees are eligible to adjust to lawful permanent resident status after one year of continuous presence in the United States. These immigrants are limited to 10,000 adjustments per fiscal year. Dhs.gov



What the women refer to as the dog kennel [*la perrera*].



What the women refer to as the icebox [*la nevera*] or the cooler [*la hielera*].