



WISCONSIN CONFERENCE

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

Welcoming the Immigrant by Lisa Hart

When immigrants live in your land with you, you must not cheat them. 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 CEB



Last June, delegates to the Wisconsin Conference Annual Meeting voted for our conference to become an "Immigrant Welcoming Conference." Less than a month later, the Wisconsin Conference was one of five UCC conferences to submit a resolution of witness to the General Synod "On Becoming an Immigrant Welcoming Church." The delegates to the 31st General Synod of the United Church of Christ voted for our denomination to become an "Immigrant Welcoming Church."

In the months leading up to these votes, and in the months following, I have been asked two primary questions. First, why is the Church involving itself in what seems to be a political issue? And, what does it mean for a church to be "immigrant welcoming"? Both are good questions, and both deserve thoughtful answers.

Yes, immigration is a political issue. This is because our government and our political parties have made it a political issue. Yet, for people of faith, it has always been a faith issue. The Bible is filled with verses that instruct us on how God calls us to treat the immigrant. The words may vary...immigrant, stranger, foreigner, alien...but the meaning is the same. Repeatedly, we are told to show hospitality, to welcome them, to treat them as citizens. There are no qualifiers such as "welcome them *if...*" The message is clear...we are told to "welcome them."

I find it interesting that when we talk about the immigrant from a faith perspective, we refer both to stranger and to neighbor. The two seem to be opposites, but when Jesus is asked in Luke 10 to define who a neighbor is, Jesus tells the story we know as "The Good Samaritan." He describes a Jewish man being beaten and left to die on the side of a remote road. He was passed by a priest and a Levite, both who noticed him and then chose to ignore him. Finally, a Samaritan came along and stopped to render aid. This is notable because Samaritans would have viewed a Jewish man as "the other," an enemy...a stranger. Jesus makes it clear that the Samaritan acted as a neighbor and then commands that his listener do the same. We are called to be neighbor to the stranger.

The second question is somewhat more complicated to answer. This is because there are so many ways in which our congregations can be “immigrant welcoming.” First, it is important to spend some time studying the scriptures. It is important for the congregation to have a foundation of faith upon which they base their actions. Second, it is important to study the issues. Familiarize yourself with the variety of situations that immigrants face in our communities, state and country. This will help guide your congregation to take action that responds to the needs of the immigrant community. It is also helpful to have a basic understanding of the laws involving immigration and immigrant rights. Finally, your congregation should discern how they want to actively become “immigrant welcoming.” There are many options: from supporting immigrants by attending rallies and protests for immigrant rights, to providing support for refugee resettlement efforts, to offering to accompany immigrants when they are checking in with immigration officials, to becoming a sanctuary congregation. The list goes on...

To help congregations learn more about what it means to become an “Immigrant Welcoming Congregation,” the Immigration Working Group of the Wisconsin Conference UCC is working in partnership with the Wisconsin Council of Churches to offer events in each of our associations. The first such event will be held at First Congregational UCC in Waukesha on April 14th from 10 am until 3 pm. For this event, SOPHIA is also partnering with us to provide leadership. We encourage congregations from both the Southeast and Northeast Associations to send teams of people (or individuals) to learn more about becoming “immigrant welcoming.” [Click here more information and to register.](#)

Becoming Welcoming Congregations Workshops

Workshop: What You Need to Know About Refugee Resettlement Today

Attendees will learn important facts about refugees (some may surprise you!) and how you can be involved without being overwhelmed. Learn how time-limited and structured support to LSS is easier than you might think and more powerful than you could imagine.

Bio: Mary Flynn has been with Lutheran Social Services of Wisconsin and Upper Michigan for more than 26 years, the last 8 years as Program Manager of Refugee Resettlement. Mary has appeared on Wisconsin Public Radio, Milwaukee Public Radio and Wisconsin Public Television discussing refugee trends and services. She was a plenary speaker at the inaugural Our City of Nations Conference in Milwaukee in December 2015. Mary strives to follow the LSS tenets of valuing the infinite worth of the individual, diversity, interdependence, excellence and innovation. She also believes in the importance of humor in the workplace and humane workloads for staff.

Workshop: Becoming a Supportive Congregation of the New Sanctuary Movement

This workshop will cover what a church needs to become sanctuary. The pros and cons as well as the option of becoming supportive of a sanctuary church, as opposed to becoming one, will be discussed.

Bio: Bernie Gonzalez is a Mexican immigrant who came to the US at the age of 14, proud husband and father of 5. He is also a U.S. Army Veteran. Currently Bernie is a Lead Organizer for SOPHIA, a faith based organization at the local level, supported by WISDOM at the state level and Gamaliel at the national level. Bernie and his organization currently focus on mass incarceration issues, healthcare, transportation, housing and his passion, which is immigration. Providing leadership training to those affected by the issues is part of Bernie's role as an organizer. Currently Bernie facilitates a state-wide immigration call and participates on a national immigration call facilitated by Gamaliel's Civil Rights of Immigrants. Bernie is always planning events and actions with his task force members in order to continue to find ways to help our brothers and sisters at the local, state and national level.

Workshop: Becoming Welcoming Communities: Immigration in Light of Biblical Faith – A Curriculum for Congregations

This workshop will introduce "Becoming Welcoming Communities: Immigration in the Light of Biblical Faith," a study guide for congregations from the Wisconsin Council of Churches. Through discussion and interactive exercises, the guide weaves together biblical stories of migration and displacement; the history of immigration from the 19th Century to the present day; contemporary experiences of immigrants and refugees; opportunities for participants to explore their own immigrant roots; and an overview of current immigration policy.

Bio: Alexia Gianitsos is a Religious Studies major at the UW-Madison and Public Policy Intern with the Wisconsin Council of Churches. Her interests and passions led her to study both religious studies and sociology in college. She sees both the study of religion and society more broadly, as integral parts of understanding human nature and more importantly, social injustice. She is personally interested in the Syrian refugee crisis. While visiting her family in Greece in the summers since 2014, she had the opportunity to observe the varying reaction of the Greek Orthodox church in response to the influx of refugees. For her senior thesis, she plans on moving this analysis to

America, focusing on the way biblical worldviews are shaped to fit political agendas surrounding immigration.

Workshop: Understanding the Immigration Debate

The United States is home to approximately 10million undocumented immigrants. What to do about the situation is an ongoing topic of fierce debate that has bubbled for decades. Yet most people have surprisingly little knowledge about the exact nature of the US immigration system and the implications of different proposed solutions.

Bio: Sarah Blackwell is a Milwaukee-based immigration attorney. An immigrant herself, she has been practicing immigration law for 12 years, mostly doing family-based immigration, waivers of inadmissibility, removal proceedings and naturalization.