



The Pilgrim Church: We are All Strangers in a Strange Land

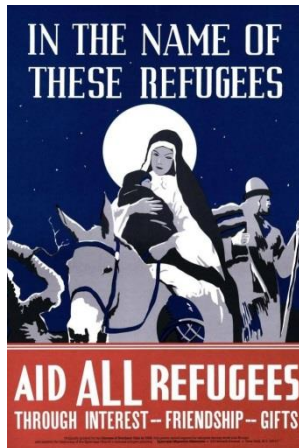
A Statement from the Social Justice Commission of the Episcopal Diocese of Western Massachusetts

The Rt. Rev. Douglas J. Fisher, *ex officio*

Easter 2017

Recent shifts in American policies have confused, concerned, and threatened members of the Body of Christ in our diocese, across our country, and around the world. Specifically, national policies regarding refugees and immigrants have been re-written, and in some cases long-standing agreements have been reversed.

Deportation orders, border detainment, and aggressive immigration enforcement policies were enacted under the previous presidential administration.¹ These policy shifts were often underplayed or overlooked, particularly when President Obama signed the DACA Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals measure in 2012.²



However, the current administration of President Trump takes all of the previous administration's enforcement measures and intensifies them significantly. Immigration and Customs Enforcement seem to have free rein to target and forcibly deport anyone, even those who are actively applying for citizenship.³

Additionally, refugees are being stopped at our borders. The State Department offices responsible for screening refugees have been put on hold, and the number of refugees admitted, even those approved, has been significantly reduced, as reported by our partner agency, Ascentria Care Alliance.⁴ This includes not just applicants seeking refuge from the "banned countries," but *all* refugees. These are families like ours, desperately trying to escape the horrors of war. Pope Francis reminds

¹ See: <http://www.npr.org/2016/08/31/491965912/5-things-to-know-about-obamas-enforcement-of-immigration-laws> and <http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/president-obama-the-legacy/obama-leaves-behind-mixed-legacy-immigration-n703656>

² <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/11/what-obamas-immigration-action-actually-does/383037/>

³ <http://www.wbur.org/news/2017/03/30/green-card-ice-arrests-lawrence>

⁴ <http://www.telegram.com/news/20170320/with-no-refugees-to-resettle-worcester-agency-cuts-jobs>

us: “Migrants and refugees are not pawns on the chessboard of humanity. They are children, women, and men who leave or are forced to leave their homes for various reasons, who share a legitimate desire for knowing and having, but above all for being more.”⁵ These policies drastically hinder the sustainability of our ministries: Episcopal Migrant Ministries in Westfield and Ascentria have had to radically reduce their staff and services, due to the unexpected elimination of federal funding for resettlement.

Finally, legal immigrants and native-born Americans who even *appear* to be LatinX or Muslim or “foreign” have been targeted, from stabbings in New York to shootings in Kansas. Mosques and even synagogues are being targeted in a wave of largely under-reported hate crimes that have spiked since the presidential inauguration.⁶

“But the Church in this time can also draw upon our identity as a unified band of pilgrims, finding our way to the New Jerusalem through a confusing land.”

There are real safety concerns for families across our diocese, in our towns and neighborhoods, and next to us in the pews on Sunday. There are real safety concerns for those trying to escape war, who are being sent back to the violence and brokenness of their home countries. There are real safety concerns for people of color and those who are visibly non-Christian, as hate crimes continue to rise.

As followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to be ever mindful that the Holy Family themselves were refugees, when King Herod sought to kill Israelite children under three years old (Matthew 2). According to the laws of ancient Israel and the Israelite covenant of ritual worship, God repeatedly commands all Jews (and ourselves as Christians) that they are commanded to care for the aliens and immigrants in their own land, for they themselves were aliens in Egypt (Leviticus 19, Deuteronomy 26). And in the early Church, St. Paul proclaims that our different races and backgrounds are irrelevant to our connection to Jesus and each other, for “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3).

Hospitality is a biblical mandate, repeated over and over again in the Old Testament and the New Testament. It has been central in Christian practice for centuries. The Rule of Benedict reminds us that all guests are to be received as Christ himself. The Greek word for hospitality is *xenophilia*, the love of the stranger. However, we seem to find ourselves in a political climate ruled by *xenophobia*, the fear of the stranger.

But the Church in this time can also draw upon our identity as a unified band of pilgrims, finding our way to the New Jerusalem through a confusing land. Episcopal theologian and visionary William Stringfellow (who was a member of the Diocese of Western Massachusetts) writes:

⁵ Message for the 2014 World Day of Migrants and Refugees, September 24, 2013

⁶ See: <http://www.telegram.com/news/20170413/suspect-in-islamic-center-break-in-bid-sent-for-mental-evaluation>

According to the biblical testimony, on the day of Pentecost there are gathered in one place [people] of every tribe and tongue who are, in becoming the new society of the church, no longer divided and separated and unreconciled on account of their differences of race or language, ideology or class, nationality or age, sex or status, occupation or education, or, indeed, even place and time (Acts 2). Such distinctions, so esteemed in the world that they are representative of the idols [people] worship and vainly look to for justification, are surpassed in such a way in the establishment of the church in history that the church is characterized, biblically, as “a new creation,” “a holy nation,” “a priest among the nations,” “a foretaste of the Kingdom of God,” “a pilgrim people”... (*Imposters of God*)

Questions for Reflection

- *Can we, as the Church, claim our identity as this “pilgrim people” in these days?*
- *Can we leave behind our fears and false notions of “us” and “them” that divide us?*
- *Can we discover a new identity together in Christ and journey together as one people from different races and nations?*
- *Can this new identity be so rooted in love that we reach out and ask all people of all faiths to journey with us?*
- *Can we open our eyes and see and know that many of our neighbors and fellow Episcopalians in our diocese have been directly affected by these policies?*

We are part of the Jesus Movement. Let’s intentionally focus on that second word, “movement.” How are we called to be a people on the move, journeying together to the New Jerusalem? We are pilgrims in a foreign land, welcoming all to join with us in finding a new home, a place of peace and welcome filled with people from every corner of the earth.

“Can we open our eyes and see and know that many of our neighbors and fellow Episcopalians in our diocese have been directly affected by these policies?”

We, as the Social Justice Commission of the Diocese of Western Massachusetts believe that we can. With Bishop Fisher, we believe that the Church was made for times like these. And so, we offer these steps to help. These are in order of direct engagement.

What the Church Can Do

- 1) **Pray every Sunday in worship** for those who are refugees and those who are seeking to resettle. Pray for those who are enforcing unjust laws, and pray for those who are using fear tactics to intimidate families.
- 2) **Write letters** in solidarity to communities affected by the Executive Orders and copy your elected officials.
- 3) **Facilitate conversations in your congregation** about immigration and refugee resettlement.
 - Base the conversation on facts rather than hearsay.
 - Hold the vision of the Church as a “pilgrim people” front and center.

- Please see ["Welcoming the Stranger."](#) our diocesan resource for opening discussions on immigration.
- 4) **Consult ecumenical partners** to find out what they are doing to aid local undocumented immigrant families and collaborate when possible.
 - 5) **Support Sanctuary** if you learn that there is a sanctuary church in your community.
 - 6) **Sign up to be on a rapid-response team.** ICE has been conducting raids at night, so that they can avoid witness and publicity. Simply joining with others and appearing in solidarity at a raid site can deter their actions.
 - 7) **Consider becoming a sanctuary church,** if you have the resources in your own congregation.
 - 8) **Support local Trust Policies.** Many towns in Massachusetts have been enacting Trust Policies (this is the new language instead of "Sanctuary City") with the Select Board and Police Departments. Some are being voted on at the spring Town Meetings. Is your hometown considering such a policy? How can your congregation get the word out to attend the Town Meeting and vote for a Trust Policy? Write editorial/letter the week before the town meeting vote, and show up to the meeting.

Conclusion

In this Easter season, we give thanks for the new and abundant life that Christ offers to all. We call on our Churches and on all people of good will to speak a word of mercy, compassion, and hope, and to recommit to Christ's mission of transforming the world from the nightmare it is for some into the dream that God has for it. Amen. Alleluia.

Members of the Social Justice Commission

- **Ms. Lee Cheek**, Co-Chair (Grace Church in the Southern Berkshires)
- **The Rev. Dr. Harvey Hill**, Co-Chair (St. David's, Agawam)
- **The Rev. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas, Ph.D.** (Missioner for Creation Care) *ex officio*
- **The Rt. Rev. Dr. Douglas John Fisher**, *ex officio*
- **Ms. Leah Gregg** (Christ Church Cathedral, Springfield)
- **The Rev. Lauren J. Holm** (Bethesda Lutheran Church & East Church, Congregational, Springfield)
- **Ms. Alexizendria Link** (St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Worcester)
- **The Rev. Sarah Syer** (Grace Church, Amherst)
- **The Rev. Dr. Richard Simpson** (Canon to the Ordinary) *ex officio*
- **The Rev. Peter Swarr** (St. Mark's, East Longmeadow)
- **The Rev. Jane G. Tillman, Ph.D.** (St. Paul's, Stockbridge)
- **The Rev. Dave Woessner** (St. Michael's-on-the-Heights, Worcester)

Local Resources

Berkshire Region

[Berkshire Immigrant Center](#)

88 South St., Pittsfield 01201
413-445-4881
info@berkshireic.com
www.berkshireic.com

(2nd floor of 1st Baptist Church; monthly hours in South County at Grace Episcopal Church in Great Barrington)

[Multicultural Bridge](#)

Gwendolyn Van Sant, Director
17 Main St., Suite 2,
Lee, MA 01238
413-394-4029
www.multiculturalbridge.org

(A resource for immigrant issues; Multicultural Bridge is currently working to get local Trust Policies written with local Select Boards, and Police Departments for presentation at Town Meetings.)

[Jewish Family Service of Western MA](#)

(Berkshire County Office)
196 South St., Pittsfield 01201
413-442-4360 x 17
info@jfswm.org
www.ifswm.org

(Working to resettle Syrian families in the Pittsfield area)

Pioneer Valley Region

[Center for New Americans](#)

James House, 42 Gothic St.,
Northampton
413.587.0084

[Interfaith Opportunities Network \(ION\)](#)

[Pioneer Valley Project](#)

<http://www.pioneervalleyproject.org/>
FB: Pioneer Valley Project

(PVP is a coalition of churches, synagogues, labor unions, and other organizations that have a strong interest in community life in the Pioneer Valley.)

Worcester Region

[Ascentria Care Alliance](#)

11 Shattuck Street
Worcester, MA 01605

[Christian Community Church](#)

108 Beacon St. Worcester
(508) 304-6023

[Worcester Interfaith Alliance](#)

10 Irving St.
Worcester, MA 01609
(508) 754 5001
worcester.interfaith@gmail.com
<http://worcesterinterfaith.net>