

IMMIGRATION AND THE REFORMED CHURCH IN AMERICA

In Marshalltown, Iowa, a young girl stands shivering outside her elementary school. She stands there still, after all the buses have left. Most parents have picked up their children over an hour ago. She doesn't know what else to do. She's new enough to town that she has no one to call and no idea how to get home. She is afraid.

In Greeley, Colorado, a mother lays her head on the kitchen table at six in the morning after a long night. Her husband disappeared yesterday like many others in the neighborhood. All night she's been trying to locate him and comfort her children, who are afraid for their father. She is exhausted and scared and doesn't know if she should send her children to school today when they wake. What if they disappear too?

Stories like these were told in newspapers across the country on December 13, 2006, the day after the largest workplace raid in U.S. history to date. The Immigration and Custom Enforcement (ICE) raid of six Swift & Co. plants across the country resulted in 1,217 arrests on immigration charges. The raids were focused on identity-theft crimes, but only sixty-five arrests related to that investigation. In the days following the raid, detained workers, primarily Mexican and Central American immigrants, were held in undisclosed locations and relatives had extreme difficulty getting information about their loved ones.

The ICE raids on Swift & Company plants illustrate how powerfully and broadly the United States is gripped by the issue of immigration. During the November elections of 2006, candidates across the country rallied their supporters by expressing their positions on immigration policy. Some argued for tighter borders and strict enforcement of immigration laws while others argued for naturalization, citing the economy's dependence on the immigrant work force.

Increased anxiety over homeland security since the terrorist attacks in 2001 has focused attention on the nation's borders. Political discourse on immigration policy has increased and new legislation has been introduced in both houses of Congress. In December 2005 the Border Protection, Antiterrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act of 2005 (H.R. 4437) passed in the House. Though the bill never passed through Congress to become a law, its success in the House demonstrates the potential for legislation that could harm illegal immigrants. H.R. 4437 would have caused sweeping changes in immigration law resulting in, among other things, provision for seven hundred miles of fencing along the U.S./Mexico border, greater responsibility being given to local governments to enforce immigration law, mandates for employers to verify workers' citizenship, significant stiffening of fines for employing illegal immigrants, and prohibitions against sanctuary policies that would criminalize assistance offered to illegal immigrants by individuals and organizations, including churches. In 2006 the Senate passed a different bill, the Comprehensive Immigration Reform Act (S. 2611), which also would have increased security along the U.S./Mexico border but additionally would have granted citizenship to long-time illegal immigrants and created a guest-worker program. This bill expired before becoming a law as well. The 109th session of Congress addressed dozens of proposed items on immigration, and this trend promises to continue.

For a variety of legitimate reasons, Christians wrestle with the complexity of this issue. However, the Bible speaks powerfully about marginalized people in general and immigrants in particular, compelling Christians to act with compassion. As General Synod papers have expressed frequently, the plight of immigrants sharing communities with Christian churches is not something that is theologically neutral, and immigration policy is a topic to which the gospel speaks with clarity and authority.

The subject of immigration has been addressed regularly in the last two decades by the RCA with significant statements and resolutions coming forward in 1982, 1983, 1984, 1985, 1986, 1987, 1988, 1993, and 1995. These reports have cited the ways God has instructed the church to give special care to resident aliens (e.g., Exod. 2:11-22, 22:21; Deut. 24:17-22, Mal. 3:5). They lift up Jesus' regular attention to the foreigner in his ministry of grace and healing (e.g., the Good Samaritan, the centurion's servant, the tenth leper). They also confess that the church of Christ is a community of aliens adopted into God's family. General Synod has repeatedly affirmed the principles of the 1982 statement:

Concern for the welfare of the sojourner, the alien, the uprooted, and those seeking a better homeland, is a pervasive theme of Scripture...The Christian church has traditionally been a major agent in ministry to the needs of immigrants and refugees and in shaping national response to these newcomers. Current debate on immigration policy must be informed by our highest religious and social principles (*MGS 1982*, p. 83).

In 1983 a major General Synod report on U.S. immigration policy noted that much of the U.S. history of relating to immigrants has been marked by racial and economic prejudice. The report also declared, "Scripture makes it clear that justice, mercy and compassion for those in need transcend national, racial and other boundaries....The church has good reason, therefore, to encourage and advocate non-discriminatory public policies for the nation" (*MGS 1983*, pp. 61-62).

As the RCA studies and affirms the Belhar Confession, the same sentiments are confessed there:

We believe that God, in a world full of injustice and enmity, is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged; that God calls the church to follow him in this, for God brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry...that God supports the downtrodden, protects the stranger, helps orphans and widows and blocks the path of the ungodly.

General Synod has also encouraged particular positions in relation to U.S. legislation. In 1983 the general secretary was instructed to communicate to Congress the General Synod's opposition to the Simpson-Mazzoli Bill, which discriminated against aliens, and to communicate support for amnesty for illegal aliens residing in the U.S. (*MGS 1983*, R-1, p. 62). In 1984 the General Synod supported the Immigration Reform Act because it was in agreement with their 1983 statements (*MGS 1984*, R-14, pp. 83-84). General Synod opposed the Immigration Act of 1988 because it damaged the ability of families to reunite (*MGS 1988*, R-26, p. 93). In 1995 the General Synod instructed the general secretary to communicate to the president of the U.S. the RCA's support of the rights of immigrants to access public services (*MGS 1995*, R-9, p. 90).

The wellness and safety of immigrants in the United States, legal and illegal, is an issue of the kingdom of God and it matters to the RCA and to Reformed churches. Just as Christian churches were impacted by the December 2006 ICE raids at Swift & Company plants, RCA churches have been impacted by the persecution of illegal immigrants as well. In May 2006 federal agents performed a raid on an apartment complex in Avenel, New Jersey. Thirty-five Indonesian immigrants were taken into custody. The residents of this building

were terrified as federal agents filled their homes and trained weapons on them during the raid. The Reformed Church of Highland Park responded by gathering forty Indonesians from Avenel for prayer. This church was their home, with about eighty to one hundred people attending the weekly Sunday evening Indonesian service. The church opened its doors in this time of crisis and embodied the radical hospitality of Christ by housing for a week in its basement twenty-five people who were afraid to return to their homes. Nearly every family that attends this Reformed church was impacted by the raid and is now even more acutely aware of the ways U.S. immigration laws affect their life together and the life of the church.

As public policy continues to be debated and citizens weigh in, may the scriptural witness of the RCA and its members continue to consistently advocate for the rights of the poor and oppressed. May members of the RCA continue to recognize that “in times of transition people particularly need the comfort and hope of the gospel and the opportunity to be part of a community where there is acceptance and belonging. In times of transition people are also particularly receptive to the Good News” (*MGS 1985*, p. 224)—a recognition that is particularly poignant in light of “Our Call.” As the church continues to embrace the vision of being a multiracial and multiethnic community, may the RCA faithfully and hospitably extend the welcome and love of Christ to the illegal immigrant populations in the United States and advocate for legislation that will protect and serve them.

► A motion was made to amend R-65 as follows:

...welcome and love of Christ to the ~~undocumented~~ immigrant populations in the United States and Canada and... ◀

VOTED: To not adopt the amendment to R-65.

R-65

To distribute the paper “Immigration and the Reformed Church in America” with a list of current immigration legislation via the RCA’s monthly combined resource mailing, as well as through the RCA website, encouraging members, churches, and staff to extend the welcome and love of Christ to the undocumented immigrant populations in the United States and Canada and advocate for legislation that will protect and serve them. (ADOPTED)

A motion was made to amend R-66:

R-66

To instruct the General Synod Council to commission a brief study guide to be available by General Synod 2008 that will educate and inform congregations about the plethora of issues that drive the immigration debate; and further,

to encourage congregations to assist immigrants to become citizens of the United States or Canada and to welcome them into the Reformed Church in America. (ADOPTED AS AMENDED)