

IMMIGRANTS

A position paper of Ethnic America Network (EAN)
www.EthnicAmerica.com



The Ethnic America Network (EAN) is a coalition of ministries encouraging local churches to share Christ's love with the growing ethnic diversity in our communities. Our mission is to glorify God by encouraging and equipping ministries of all cultures for cross-cultural advancement of the gospel and intercultural unity in Jesus Christ. Our vision is to see a multiplication of ministries and churches actively pursuing cross-cultural advancement of the gospel and intercultural unity in Jesus Christ across the USA and Canada.

In the wake of growing ethnic diversity in North America, this paper examines the issues around the topic of immigration, focusing on the immigrants themselves. For the purpose of this paper, in line with the UN definition, an "immigrant" is: "A person who moves to a country other than that of his or her usual residence for a period of at least a year...so that the country of destination effectively becomes his or her new country of usual residence."¹

Immigration is neither a recent development nor a phenomenon exclusive to North America. It has been a worldwide experience throughout human history, driven by *push/pull* dynamics. Harsh realities (war, famine, persecution, etc.) drive some from their homelands, while most are drawn by the expectation for more opportunities and a better life.

Prompted by the wave of immigrants in the closing decades of the last century, Christian leaders founded EAN at the start of this century to focus and help equip North American churches at this strategic intersection of Great Commission opportunities and Great Commandment obligations. EAN's position on immigration and immigrants is summarized in the principles articulated below and is elaborated in the following pages.

OUR PRINCIPLES ON IMMIGRANTS

- 1. Migration is the idea, design and mechanism of our sovereign God.** The whole Bible is a story of people on the move. Throughout history, God has used migration—whether voluntary or involuntary—to draw people to Himself. When peoples migrate near us, we bear responsibility to love them in the name of Jesus Christ.
- 2. Immigrants are strangers whom we as God's covenant people are to befriend and love as ourselves** (Ex. 22:21; Lev. 19:9-10, 34; Dt. 10:17-19). The second greatest commandment is to love our neighbor as ourselves (Mt. 22:39; Mk. 12:31). Jesus in Luke 10:29-37 teaches that "neighbor" means that we are to love *even* the most unlikely human brother or sister.
- 3. Relocation to another country profoundly impacts all immigrants.** In their new country of residence, immigrants face an array of issues and challenges: e.g., legal, social, familial, linguistic, cultural, spiritual, and economic. It is imperative that the Body of Christ understand these dynamics and intentionally love and serve immigrants as fellow persons created in the image of God, regardless of their immigration status.
- 4. Our "Great Commission" from Christ is to make disciples of all the ethnicities, whether near or far.** The entire narrative of the book of Acts demonstrates the developing understanding of the first Christian believers as they progressively understood that the gospel of Christ was intended for all peoples.
- 5. Many immigrants are from Christian traditions, thus are to be welcomed as those who love and honor Christ.**² Jesus calls us to toward oneness (John 17) because we belong to those who belong to Jesus.

6. **We have much to receive from those God is sending, who are bringing with them a vibrant faith.** The future health of the North American church may well depend on our receiving the blessing of these immigrants.
 7. **Intercultural friendship and multi-ethnic worship portray Christ's power and purpose** (2 Cor. 5:16-18; Eph. 2:13-22). This is an earthly preview of the ultimate heavenly reality (Rev. 7:9-10).
 8. **Within local communities, churches should lead the way in welcoming and assisting immigrants.** There are many ways to communicate to the wider community that these "new neighbors" are valued members of society.
 9. **Christians should advocate for just and compassionate immigration laws rooted in biblical values.** North Americans have a voice in government, so not only can we influence laws and policies, but we bear some responsibility for them. We must embrace a biblical perspective on human migration, familiarize ourselves with immigration law and how it is administered, and work for remediation wherever human government laws fall short of God's standards.
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ELABORATION OF OUR PRINCIPLES ON IMMIGRANTS

1. Migration is the idea, design and mechanism of our sovereign God.

Migrate is the root word of *immigrate*, so migration is the context for understanding immigration. God's comprehensive "cultural mandate" to humanity from the start is migrational. God's first statement to mankind commands migration: "God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; **fill the earth** and subdue it'" (Gen. 1:28). This command was not washed away by the flood, but was reiterated afterward. "Then God blessed Noah and his sons, saying to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number and **fill the earth**'" (Gen. 9:1), and the next chapter indicates how peoples spread out over the earth.

The whole Bible is a story of people on the move. Migration often evokes various forms of resistance, from residents already there. Part of this stems from our failure to understand that "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it" (Ps. 24:1). He owns it all, entrusting us to be stewards in whatever territory we occupy or influence.³

2. Immigrants are strangers whom we as God's covenant people are to befriend and love as ourselves.

The term immigrant is not found in most Bible translations, which use such functional equivalents as *sojourner*, *alien*, *foreigner* or *stranger*. Immigrant is the best contemporary synonym of the Hebrew word *ger* ("sojourner"), used ninety-two times. Prominent biblical characters (Abraham, Rebekah, Joseph, Ruth, David, Jesus, Paul, etc.), as well as the nation of Israel itself, had immigrant stories. Given this experience, God gave His covenant people specific instructions on how they were to treat immigrants, remembering that they themselves had been immigrants in Egypt. Going beyond basic compassion, they were to treat the immigrant as one of their native-born (Lev. 19: 34). God repeatedly states "the same law applies to both the native-born and to the foreigner residing among you" (Ex. 12:49; Lev. 24:32; Num. 15:29). "Any immigrant who lives with you must be treated as if they were one of your citizens. You must love them as yourself" (Lev. 19:18, 34, *Common English Bible*). God gave His people laws to ensure that they provided for the needs of the vulnerable. They were to harvest their crops in a single sweep, leaving what was left behind to the immigrants, orphans and widows (Dt. 24:21).

The New Testament echoes the idea of God's people as immigrants, "aliens and strangers" on earth, seeking a heavenly kingdom (Heb. 11:13). A recurring theme is the command to "practice

hospitality” (Rom. 12:13). This Greek word for hospitality is *philoxenia* (“love of strangers”), the exact opposite of *xenophobia*, the fear of strangers. In showing kindness to immigrants and others who may be strangers to us, we might unexpectedly find blessing, perhaps even entertaining angels, unaware (Heb. 13: 2). Our highest call to minister to strangers is from the lips of our Lord Jesus Christ: “I was a stranger and you took me in. . . . Inasmuch as you have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, you have done it unto me” (Mt. 25: 43, 40).

3. Relocation to another country profoundly impacts all immigrants.

The immigrant experience is challenging in the best of circumstances but, in varying degrees, it is a perpetual negotiation of loss and acquisition. A challenge for the first generation immigrant can at times be mere survival, as in the trauma of a transplanted tree. Immigrants may have endured prolonged physical hardship in migration, even risking their lives or knowing of countrymen who lost theirs in the process. These traumas often accentuate adjustment difficulties, family bonding issues, and culture shock. Safe arrival brings a host of new challenges, even threats. The host culture may seem, and even be, foreign and hostile in many aspects.

The next generation, those who came as children (commonly referred to as generation 1.5), see a different horizon, usually one of promise and possibilities. They pick up the language more quickly, get accustomed to the food and dress, make friends in the host culture and pursue education. However, they also must navigate between the obligations of two, or more, cultures bearing great responsibility as the bridge generation for their parents’ assimilation.

The Body of Christ must understand these dynamics and intentionally love, serve, appreciate and learn from immigrants as fellow persons created in the image of God. Reshaping how immigrants view themselves in light of God’s love and forgiveness for all is central to the gospel.

4. Our “Great Commission” from Christ is to make disciples of all the ethnicities, whether near or far.

North American Christians tend to know Matthew’s version of the Great Commission (28:18-20), which urges us to “make disciples of all nations. . . .” The phrase “of all nations” translates from *panta ta ethne* which Matthew wrote in the Greek language. While it is good to send missionaries to other countries (the world has over 200), Jesus was not referring to such geopolitical entities, but to ethno-linguistic groups, people groups, or ethnicities (about 12,000 in the world).

Jesus mentions four “mission zones” in Acts 1:8— Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth. This is a geographic progression, the progression followed through the book of Acts. It was like a pebble into the pond at Jerusalem, which rippled through Judea, Samaria and out to the ends of the then-known earth. Historically, the North American church has thought of missions mainly as long distance, those “ends of the earth,” but Jesus said the Holy Spirit would empower his disciples to witness of him, beginning locally, then progressively beyond, through every human context. Thus, our commitment to mission must be just as comprehensive and it represents a simultaneous opportunity to be living witnesses of Christ in each of these “zones.” Some writers refer to those who are near us but who are religiously or culturally different—people who are the ones often the most overlooked and neglected—as being our “Samaria.”

5. Many immigrants are from Christian traditions, thus are to be welcomed as those who love and honor Christ.⁴

Immigrants who come here as believers are our brothers and sisters in Christ. The U.S. has admitted an estimated 12.7 million Christian immigrants over the past two decades, including 61 percent of the 1 million immigrants who received permanent resident status in 2012.⁵ The only

populated continent where Christianity is **not** showing overall numerical growth is North America. Within this larger picture, however, immigrant congregations are in fact growing, and they are doing so faster than any other segment of evangelical churches, according to research by Dr. Todd Johnson at Gordon-Conwell Seminary.⁶ And many evangelical denominations report that their fastest growth (and sometimes their only growth) is coming from immigrant communities. Besides starting new churches for their own ethnicities, immigrants have helped existing North American congregations become multi-ethnic, or more so.

6. We have much to receive from those God is sending, who are bringing with them a vibrant faith.

Some immigrants have endured great suffering and have much to teach us about faithful humility and perseverance in the face of hardship and deprivation. Likewise, some have been persecuted for the cause of Christ and we have much to learn from them. These are unashamed of the gospel and will eagerly proclaim Christ and plant churches. Could it be that we are witnessing God's gift for our own revitalization in the sending of brothers and sisters from lands where the gospel is spreading with power? The future health of the Church in North America may well depend on our receiving the blessing of these Christians. In spite of this great potential, the established Church is slow to open up to the contribution which immigrant congregations bring.

7. Intercultural friendships and multi-ethnic worship portray Christ's power and purpose.

The concept of intercultural friendship in Christ is built on the conclusion that if we belong to Jesus, then we belong to those who belong to Jesus.⁷ Intercultural friendship portrays Christ's power to mitigate our ethnocentric wills and melt our stereotypic walls. Christ died for the sake of all so that those who are alive should not live for themselves but for Christ who died for them and was raised. So then, from this point on we won't recognize people by human standards: "If anyone is in Christ, that person is part of the new creation. The old things have gone away, and look, new things have arrived!" (2 Cor. 5:17 CEB).

Stereotyping makes a broad statement (often derogatory) about a group of people, and universalizes it to apply to each individual within the group. Stereotyping focuses on ways "they" are different from "us." Recognizing our common humanity as created in God's image, and having become brothers and sisters in Christ, are theological antidotes to stereotyping. The practical antidote is personal connection with individuals which begins the process of dispelling the stereotypes through personal friendship.

Christ's power can remove human walls erected as artificial barriers. "For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one, and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall" (Eph.2: 14). The two groups first addressed were Jew and Gentile, but the principle and power applies in the church to all human differences, "Now you who were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ...abolishing in His flesh the enmity...that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, establishing peace, and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity....So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household...being fitted together...being built together into a dwelling of God in the spirit" (Eph.2: 13, 15-16, 19, 21-22).

8. Within local communities, churches should lead the way in welcoming and assisting immigrants.

First-generation immigrants and their children experience great need in getting settled in their new country of residence. Churches should pursue ministries to these new neighbors. Many such ministries could be done by a single local church, while others are better suited for churches working in partnership. Start with ministry *to* immigrants, but ministry *with* and *by* immigrants

should increase as time progresses. Over time, churches should always pursue intercultural unity which embraces the diverse cultures in the body of Christ.

Leading the way necessitates setting an example. A key first step in demonstrating Christ-like attitudes is to adopt a welcoming vocabulary:

- Speak of *immigrant* instead of *immigration*. Immigration is a controversial issue; an immigrant is a person created in God's image, and for whom Christ died.
- Say *new neighbor* instead of *alien* or *illegal alien*. The latter term infers disapproval.
- When you encounter people who look like they may be from another country, wonder *whether they personally know Jesus* instead of *wondering about their legal status*.

Many people who are resistant to immigrants and immigration do not really know any immigrants. As we get to know our new neighbors as individuals, we discover similarities we had not recognized. And we learn that many of the differences are extenuating circumstances or excruciating challenges from which God in His grace has spared us.

9. Christians should advocate for just and compassionate immigration laws rooted in biblical values.

North Americans believers have a voice in our governments, so not only can we influence their laws and policies, but we bear some responsibility for them. Polls suggest that most Christians do not think of immigration through the lens of their faith, but as a political or economic issue.⁸

As a starting point we must become familiar with God's perspective through individual and group study of the Bible. We plan to publish a guide to assist in that study. Watch the ethnicamerica.com website for information on when such a document is available.

Second, we must acquaint ourselves with our country's immigration law and how it is handled. Appendix 2 to this paper is a brief overview of the development and status of immigration law in Canada and the U.S.A. as of August 2014.

Third, we must work toward remedying situations where man's laws on immigration fall short of God's standards.

As a non-political organization, the Ethnic America Network (EAN) has no political position on immigration. We do believe that Christians in general, and EAN personal representatives and member organizations in particular, need to advocate for just and compassionate laws and ministry, which are shaped by God's heart for our immigrant neighbors and friends.

CONCLUSION

EAN's position on immigrants has been articulated in nine principles, elaborated above. How should these principles be put into action? Their implementation may be summarized into five objectives. We urge that:

1. Statements and actions pertaining to immigration be informed by, and consistent with, the Bible.
2. North American citizens and lawful permanent residents be proactive in welcoming our newer neighbors through befriending them as individuals and learning their cultural backgrounds.
3. North American Christians and churches view immigration as both a mission opportunity and a ministry obligation.
4. The North American Church receive immigrant believers as a blessing to revitalize our churches, to bring their strengths and gifts to enhance our spiritual understanding and to enrich our corporate worship.
5. North American Christians stay informed of their government's immigration policies and how they are administered, and advocate in this realm to make human laws more reflective of God's heart.

Appendix 1 Statement of Principles

We endorse the Evangelical Immigration Table *Statement of Principles*, signed by EAN Chair T.V. Thomas and many other nationally/internationally influential evangelicals:

Our national immigration laws have created a moral, economic and political crisis in America. Initiatives to remedy this crisis have led to polarization and name calling in which opponents have misrepresented each other's positions as open borders and amnesty versus deportations of millions. This false choice has led to an unacceptable political stalemate at the federal level at a tragic human cost.

We urge our nation's leaders to work together with the American people to pass immigration reform that embodies these key principles and that will make our nation proud. As evangelical Christian leaders, we call for a bipartisan solution on immigration that:

- Respects the God-given dignity of every person
- Protects the unity of the immediate family
- Respects the rule of law
- Guarantees secure national borders
- Ensures fairness to taxpayers
- Establishes a path toward legal status and/or citizenship for those who qualify and who wish to become permanent residents

Appendix 2 Immigration Law in Canada and the United States

Note: The information presented here is, to the best of our knowledge, accurate as of August 2014. Because laws are subject to change, some of the information here may be outdated by the time you are reading this paper.

Canada's Family Class admission allows permanent residents or citizens to sponsor a family member's entry into the country. Economic class is for applicants (and their immediate families) who are likely to find employment and contribute to the economy. Canada gives cabinet-level attention to immigration, with a Minister of Citizenship, Immigration and Multiculturalism. Its *Immigration Act of 1976* was reformed in 2002 by the *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (IRPA)*. The main changes included broader discretion to immigration officials when evaluating applications. The *IRPA* is accompanied by the *Immigration and Refugees Protection Regulations*. Canada's largest tribunal is its Immigration and Refugee Board, hearing over 25,000 claims a year. Its decisions can be appealed to the Federal Court, which hears over 2,500 immigration/refugee matters annually.

The **United States** enacted immigration laws in 1882, 1924, 1943, 1965, 1986, 1990 and 1996. The current system is basically the 1965 law, which established the two largest categories: family-based and employment-based. There are four basic ways a person could become a Legal Permanent Resident ("green card"-holder), the prerequisite to becoming a citizen:

1. Family

About 226,000 permanent resident visas are available annually to citizens and Lawful Permanent Residents for spouse, parent (of a child at least age 21), or child (under age 21). Emigration takes six months to two years for such immediate relative of a U.S. citizen, but 4-5 years from such relative of a Lawful Permanent Resident.

It is very difficult in most countries in the Global South to obtain a tourist visa, so the Lawful Permanent Resident's spouse or children are also unlikely to be able to visit during that wait time, resulting in lengthy family separation. Congress has placed tight caps on how many immigrants can enter in each family-based category each year, and demand far exceeds supply.

2. Employment

At least 140,000 immigrant visas are available each year for employer-sponsored immigrants, if a U.S. company cannot find adequate workers within the U.S. Most of these are designated for "highly-skilled" immigrants with advanced degrees or exceptional abilities, but our high-tech corporations say the number of such visas available is inadequate.⁹

The more extreme shortage is among immigrant workers who are not "highly skilled." The law caps this number at 10,000 per year, but many more are needed in the agriculture, hospitality, construction and manufacturing industries. Because lawful migration is so limited for such workers, and those who come unlawfully readily find work in these sectors, unlawful migration has become widespread.

3. Diversity Lottery

Up to 50,000 each year win the State Department's free online Diversity Lottery to enter as Lawful Permanent Residents. Entrants must have at least a high school education or two years of professional experience, and may not come from any country (e.g., Mexico) that has sent 50,000 immigrants to the U.S. in the past five years.

4. Refugees

The U.S. President annually decides the additional number (80,000 in recent years) of immigrants who may enter as refugees (have fled their country of origin with a credible fear of persecution).

Immigration was tightened in 1996 by the *Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act*

(IIRAIRA). Until then, only offenses subject to five-plus years in jail triggered immediate deportation, but the IIRAIRA allowed it for a minor offense such as shoplifting. It also added a waiting period outside the U.S. for unlawful presence inside the U.S. (three years, or ten years if here unlawfully over a year), separating them from immediate family members who may be here legally. It allowed deportees to be jailed for months before an immigration board hearing. IIRAIRA has been enforced more vigorously since 9/11.

About sixty per cent of undocumented immigrants in the U.S. are from Mexico. Presidents George W. Bush and Vicente Fox met 5 times in 2001, developing an immigration deal with legislation, border enforcement, a bilateral guest worker program, and a larger Mexican role in border control. On September 6, 2001 they endorsed an agreement to complete the deal by the end of that year. But five days later, the 9/11 attackers (here on student and visitor visas from another part of the world) blew up immigration reform along with the Twin Towers in New York City. Public debate and new policy measures conflated antiterrorism measures with immigration control. Five sweeping antiterrorism measures affecting immigration in critical ways were enacted in the next four years. The *Homeland Security Act of 2002* moved the Immigration & Naturalization Service (INS) from the Department of Justice to the Department of Homeland Security.¹⁰

Can we legally serve undocumented immigrants as a church? The Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) is the federal law which sets out guidelines for foreign nationals in the U.S. The INA does not prohibit association with those who do not have a lawful immigration status, nor does it require U.S. citizens or others to report the presence of an individual without lawful immigration

status. Churches are free to put their faith into practice and open the doors of their church building to all immigrants without verifying their immigration status. Churches are lawfully able to provide access to benevolence ministries, including short term cash assistance and emergency housing. All immigrants, regardless of status, are able to receive assistance from non-governmental agencies, such as food pantries and shelters.¹¹

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Quoted in http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/sites/files/migobs/Briefing%20-%20Who%20Counts%20as%20a%20Migrant_0.pdf (accessed Sept. 9, 2014).
- ² <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/05/17/the-religious-affiliation-of-us-immigrants/> (accessed April 14, 2014).
- ³ For consistency this paper uses the term “immigrant” as a general category including both immigrants and refugees. More specifically, immigrants are migrant people who have left their homeland by their choice, while refugees are those who have left their homeland by force of external circumstances.
- ⁴ <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/05/17/the-religious-affiliation-of-us-immigrants/> (accessed April 14, 2014).
- ⁵ <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/05/17/the-religious-affiliation-of-us-immigrants/>
- ⁶ Todd Johnson, “USA Evangelicals/Evangelicals in a Global Context” (Lausanne World Pulse, January 2006). <http://www.lausanneworldpulse.com/research.php/196/01-2006> (accessed April 14, 2014).
- ⁷ For an in-depth treatment of this subject in general, see *Understanding and Embracing Intercultural Unity*, A position paper of the Ethnic America Network (EAN), Dec. 20, 2013 (www.EthnicAmerica.com).
- ⁸ Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, “Few Say Religion Shapes Immigration, Environment Views,” Sept.17, 2010; <http://www.pewforum.org/2010/09/17/few-say-religion-shapes-immigration-environment-views/> (accessed April 14, 2014).
- ⁹ National Alliance for Healthy Communities, “Silicon Valley Tech Companies Advocate for Immigration Reform,” May 4,2009. <http://www.publicceo.com/2009/04/silicon-valley-tech-companies-advocate-for-immigration-reform/> (accessed April 14, 2014).
- ¹⁰ See Marc. R. Rosenblum, *US Immigration Policy Since 9/11: Understanding the Stalemate over Comprehensive Immigration Reform*. Migration Policy Institute. <http://migrationpolicy.org/research/RMSG-us-immigration-policy-stalemate> (accessed April 14, 2014).
- ¹¹ Matthew Soerens et al, *Church Leaders Guide to Immigration* (Baltimore: World Relief, 2014), 28-29.

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