



RIO GRANDE VALLEY INTERFAITH STATEMENT ON HUMANE IMMIGRATION REFORM

As people of many diverse faith traditions, yet with one voice, we call on the President of the United States and the Congress to enact humane and comprehensive immigration reform. We respect the rule of law, but our diverse faith traditions challenge us to welcome the stranger among us with compassion and hope, trusting in God's generosity. Our immigration laws do not fit the reality of our communities and our nation. Our prayer is that we may find common ground, address the legitimate concerns posed by immigration, and heal our broken immigration system through a just reform of the current law.

At our borders and in our congregations, schools, workplaces and service programs, we witness the human consequences of an inadequate, outdated system. Border communities strain to accommodate the newcomers; families suffer long periods of separation; undocumented workers are exploited and live in fear. Anti-immigrant rhetoric in our nation plants distrust of all public officials in the hearts of migrants. No one – businessmen, immigrants, policymakers – finds the current law to be a coherent guide to the complex questions our communities face.

In our holy writings, we are called to love sojourners, and to integrate them into our communities. A nation's moral stature can be measured by the way it treats the most vulnerable in its midst. The Hebrew Bible tells us: "The strangers who sojourn with you shall be to you as the natives among you, and you shall love them as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Leviticus 19:33-34). In the New Testament, Jesus tells us to welcome the stranger, for "what you do to the least of my brothers and sisters, you do unto me" (Matthew 25:40). To welcome the stranger is to welcome a child of God.

COMMUNITY AND IMMIGRANT SAFETY

We ask all people of good will to recognize that many innocent people, many struggling families, both Mexican citizens and United States citizens, are being affected by the increase of drug-related violence on the Texas-Mexican border. It is clear that many immigrant families now seeking entry to the United States out of a fear for their safety and that of their families; this exacerbates the dimensions of the humanitarian tragedy that affects immigrant families. We are deeply troubled by reports of human trafficking of immigrants, who are held against their will by criminal elements who cruelly manipulate the vulnerability of undocumented immigrants. We also wish to thank law enforcement and public safety officials, particularly US Border Patrol, for their work in keeping the violence and human trafficking from spreading further. Nevertheless, we continue to be troubled by the presence of the border wall along the Rio Grande Valley, and consider it a counter-sign to the amicable relations between families on both sides of the River. We affirm that the current circumstances make it all the more imperative that the President and the Congress commit to enacting a comprehensive immigration reform:

Immigration reform is a key element to ensuring our country's safety because it would allow the federal government to focus on genuine threats posed by those seeking to do the country harm, rather than on individuals who lack status, who have committed no other crimes, and who desire to make a positive contribution to this country. Such a reform should allow the United States to implement immigration laws that identify and prevent the entry of persons who commit dangerous crimes. Border policies must be consistent with humanitarian values and with the need to treat all individuals with respect.

We oppose counterproductive laws mandating that local police act as immigration officials. There is a practical wisdom in maintaining distinct jurisdictions. Local families should feel free to report crime in our neighborhoods without fear that their immigration status will be immediately questioned. Confusing Federal and local jurisdictions decrease community safety and discourage immigrants from pursuing responsible community involvement.

FACILITATE IMMIGRANT INTEGRATION

One may be a stranger for a time but it is unjust for immigrants to remain strangers “outside the gates” through indefinite exclusion from full participation in American society. Many immigrants desire to naturalize but lack the necessary tools. Immigration reform policies should streamline the naturalization process, by processing application backlogs and expediting security checks to reduce waiting times.

SUPPORT MEASURES TO ADDRESS THE ROOT CAUSES OF MIGRATION

Our traditions recognize that all the goods of the earth belong to all people. All persons have the right to find in their own countries the economic, political, religious and social opportunities to live in dignity, provide for their families, and achieve a full life through the use of the gifts bestowed upon them; yet they also have the right to migrate when there is no other way to support their families. As a nation, we can help create the conditions that will give people an alternative to migration by supporting organizations working to reduce poverty in developing nations and by adopting fair trade policies, fostering equitable development for all.

ALIGN IMMIGRATION ENFORCEMENT WITH HUMANITARIAN VALUES AND FOR THE GOOD OF THE NATION

Our traditions also recognize the right of sovereign nations to control their territories and impose reasonable limits on immigration; this is necessary to provide stable conditions for the long-term development of peoples. It is also true that the more economically developed nations, with the ability to protect and feed their own residents, have an obligation to accommodate migration flows whenever possible. Neither of these principles is absolute, but rather must be applied with prudence and generosity.

The current law no longer addresses either principle. It is the responsibility of the Federal Government to craft a new and more just accommodation of these principles.

Today as a people of faith, we call attention to the moral dimensions of public policy, and recommend reforms which uphold the God-given dignity of every person, made in the image of God. Fundamental human rights such as the right to migrate and the right to support a family are critical to the repair of our nation’s immigration policies. Because we value family unity, justice, equity, compassion, love, and the humane treatment of all persons, we dedicate ourselves, in our teaching and our witness, to calling for immigration reform. It is our collective prayer that the President and Congress enact just immigration reform based on these tenets.

UPHOLD FAMILY UNITY AS A PRIORITY IN IMMIGRATION POLICES

Our faith traditions are also deeply rooted in the sanctity of the family, the essential institution for the development of healthy individuals and strong communities. We call on the Administration and Congress to craft an immigration policy that respects the good of family unity.

This means that it should seek 1) to prioritize family unity in the immigration process; 2) expeditiously to reunite immigrant families separated due to lengthy visa backlogs; 3) allow for the adjustment of status for individuals seeking to reunite with their family members and 4) remove bars to reentry that are based solely upon the fact of having been in this country without a proper visa. Attempts to devalue the family, such as denying birthright citizenship to the children of immigrants or placing family-based and employment-based visa applicants in competition with each other on a point-based system, must be rejected as injurious to family life and hence to the good of society as a whole.

CREATE A PROCESS FOR UNDOCUMENTED MIGRANTS TO EARN LEGAL STATUS AND CITIZENSHIP

The mass deportation of undocumented persons here now would be extremely costly, virtually impossible to accomplish, and would cause untold suffering to families and entire communities. Regularizing the status of undocumented workers is a reasonable way to proceed. We are not calling for amnesty; but rather we urge an immigration reform that allows undocumented immigrants and their families to earn lawful permanent residency, with a pathway to citizenship through appropriate steps such as registration, background checks, learning English, and payment of reasonable fees. Immigrants who regularize their status would wait their turn for citizenship, in keeping with principles of fairness for all immigrants.

Overly punitive criteria, such as exorbitant fees or mandating that immigrants leave the country, or making the process conditional upon complete success of border enforcement measures, would be counterproductive and should be avoided.

PROTECT WORKERS AND PROVIDE LEGAL AVENUES FOR MIGRANT WORKERS

The current immigration system denies an orderly process for immigrants to enter legally or legalize their situation, and prevents communities from benefiting from the talents and potential of valuable contributors to our society and economy. Hence an adequate reform would include an expansion of legal avenues for migrant workers to work in our country. This will help our nation meet future workforce needs in an orderly fashion. Since human work participates in God's activity of creation, workers' rights must always be fully protected. This includes the ability of immigrant workers to bring their families with them, to travel within the country as needed, to change their place of employment, and to have access to application for lawful permanent residency or citizenship, should they so desire. All workers should be protected through the enforcement of health, safety, wage, and hour laws, as well as the right to organize. As people of faith we must protect the dignity of migrants' labor and respect their economic contributions to the United States.

RESTORE DUE PROCESS PROTECTIONS AND REFORM DETENTION POLICIES

Immigration policies should respect the rights and inherent human dignity of migrants and ensure due process for all. Indiscriminate immigration raids cause trauma, fear and hardship for thousands of individuals. Such raids separate families, destroy communities, and threaten the basic rights of immigrants and U.S. citizens alike, underscoring the problems with current U.S. immigration policies and the urgent need for reform.

Witnessing the toll of incarceration on detainees, their families and our communities, we urge the Administration and Congress to reduce the use of detention for immigrants and improve detention conditions by enacting clear, enforceable reforms that include rigorous medical treatment standards and increased access to pastoral care and legal counsel.

Furthermore, we call on the government to expedite the release of individuals who pose no risk to the community and to expand the use of humane and cost-effective community-based alternatives to detention.

Affirmed by:

Most Reverend Daniel Flores
Bishop, Diocese of Brownsville

The Rt. Rev. David Reed
Bishop Suffragan
Episcopal Diocese of West Texas

Reverend Dr. Ray Tiemann
Bishop, Southwestern Texas Synod, ELCA

Reverend James Dorff
Bishop, San Antonio Episcopal Area United Methodist Church

Reverend Kelly Allen
Chair, Task Force on Immigration
Mission Presbytery, Presbyterian Church USA