

What is the immigration “crisis,” and why does it matter to the church?

There are an estimated 11 to 12 million immigrants presently living in the United States without legal status. All sides agree that this is a problem—with some viewing the situation as an “invasion” of “illegal” immigrants threatening the culture, safety, and economy of the United States, while others lament that “undocumented” immigrants are kept in the shadows, with families divided by unjust laws. Christians often feel stuck in the middle of these two views—recognizing the tension between the biblical commands to respect the law and to welcome, love, and minister to our new immigrant neighbors.

Who are these undocumented immigrants?

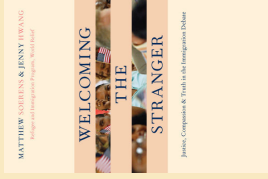
A lot of what we hear and read about undocumented immigrants is inaccurate. According to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, there were 11.6 million undocumented immigrants living in the U.S. in 2008. Of those, about 40% entered lawfully with a visa, but overstayed, while the rest entered illegally. While about 56% of undocumented immigrants come from Mexico, there are also millions of undocumented Asian, African, and European immigrants—so this is certainly not just a Mexican issue. Most immigrants without legal status, like those with legal status, come to improve their economic situation (which is often very perilous in their country of origin), to reunite families, or fleeing persecution in their country of origin.

Why don't these people come the legal way, the way that my ancestors did?

Today's immigrants come for the same reasons that immigrants have always come to the United States. In fact, immigrants have always been welcomed by some and scapegoated by others, even since the colonial era. Attitudes toward immigrants have always ebbed and flowed, but what has changed is immigration policies. Prior to 1882, there were no federal restrictions on immigration to the U.S., and no need for a visa. In the last century, though, laws have evolved to make it impossible for most people to lawfully migrate to the United States.

For More Information...

Please read *Welcoming the Stranger: Justice, Compassion, & Truth in the Immigration Debate* (InterVarsity Press, 2009). In this book, World Relief immigration experts Matthew Soerens and Jenny Hwang move beyond the rhetoric to offer a Christian response to immigration. The book includes discussion questions for group study, and is available from online bookstores and at many Christian bookstores.



“Why is immigration policy important to evangelicals? Certainly because we believe what the Bible teaches about treatment of ‘aliens in the land.’ It is also because so many Hispanic, African and Asian immigrants are evangelical Christians who are in our denominations and churches by the millions. They are us.”

Leith Anderson, President,
National Association of Evangelicals

How can we seek God's



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Answers to Tough Questions
on If, Why, and How
the Church Should
Welcome the Stranger

Why don't immigrants just wait their turn in line?

There are four basic ways that a person might obtain Lawful Permanent Resident status in the U.S.:

- Employment-Based Immigration—but these visas are almost exclusively reserved for those with “advanced degrees” and “extraordinary abilities,” not for those content to do low wage labor.
- Diversity Visa Lottery—but the odds of winning are about 1 in 200, and it's only a possibility for individuals from “under-represented” countries, not for those from Mexico, the Philippines, China, India, and other “over-represented” countries.
- Refugee or Asylee Status—for some of those fleeing persecution because of race, religion, national origin, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group, but *not* for those fleeing poverty, natural disasters, or environmental degradation.
- Family-Based Immigration—but backlogs can be as long as twenty-two years, and many others do not have a close relative who is a U.S. citizen or Lawful Permanent Resident to sponsor them.

Many individuals who come and find work in the U.S. do not fit into any of these categories, so there is really no “line” in which they could begin to wait; there is no legal way for them to come under current law.

Aren't undocumented immigrants a drain on the economy?

Actually, almost all economists agree that undocumented immigrants are good for the U.S. economy. Contrary to popular perception, most undocumented immigrants *do* pay taxes. The Social Security Administration estimates that 3 out of 4 undocumented immigrants has Social Security, Medicare, and income taxes deducted from their paychecks, and the Social Security Administration takes in between \$6 and \$7 billion each year in contributions that do not match a valid Social Security number—but those immigrants will not be eligible for any Social Security benefits under current law, nor are they eligible for public benefits such as welfare or food stamps.

How does the Bible inform the way that we think about this issue?

God tells us throughout the Scriptures that he loves and has a special concern for the alien (Deut 10:18, Ps 146:9), and he commands his people to do the same (Lev 19:33-34). God commanded the Israelites to treat the foreign-born the same as they treated native-born Israelites (Ex 12:49), but he also instituted special provisions for immigrants, along with other vulnerable groups such as orphans and widows (Deut 24:19-21, Mal 3:5).

In the New Testament, Jesus, who as a child was forced to flee as a refugee to Egypt, makes clear in the parable of the Good Samaritan that God's command to love our neighbor includes, specifically, migrants in need (Lk 10:25-37). He instructs us to welcome the stranger, for in doing so we are welcoming Christ himself (Mt 25:31-46).

But what about the fact that these people broke the law?

Romans 13:1-4 makes very clear that Christ-followers are to submit to the governmental authorities that God has established. While there may be situations when “we must obey God rather than man” (Acts 5:29), we should not lightly brush aside this biblical command. However, we can uphold the importance of the rule of law without necessarily deporting 12 million people; we could insist upon other penalties, such as a significant fine, for entering or overstaying a visa unlawfully.

It is also important to recognize that there is no conflict between the submission to authority mandated in Romans 13 and serving undocumented immigrants: we can minister to immigrants' physical needs, help to teach them English, share the good news of the gospel, and advocate for just policies that would better their situation—all without violating the law. In most states, the only area where a church could potentially violate the law would be to employ an undocumented immigrant for compensation.

Since we live in a democracy, we can advocate for immigration policies that are both welcoming of immigrants and maintain the importance of the rule of law.

How is this affecting the church?

Demographers tell us that immigrant churches are the fastest growing segment of evangelical churches in the U.S. Increasingly, when we talk about “those aliens,” we are talking about ourselves, because the Church is one Body of which each of us is an interdependent part. When one part suffers—as many undocumented brothers and sisters are, as individuals are forced into the shadows and families are divided by current laws—every part suffers (1 Cor 12:12-26). Many immigrants bring with them a vibrant faith that can help to reinvigorate our churches; others will encounter the gospel for the first time in the U.S., presenting a great mission on our doorstep.

What should our church do?

- Pray—for immigrants in your community and for your political leaders
- Educate—learn about the immigration issue from a biblical perspective; many churches have dedicated a sermon series or an adult education class to the topic
- Advocate—your legislators need to hear the moral voice of churches and their leaders; some churches have created or signed on to a statement in support of immigration reform; others have visited, written to, or called their legislators to share their opinion
- Serve—the best way to understand the immigration issue is to build relationships with immigrants, and service, such as through providing English classes, is a great way to begin

What should we encourage our government to do?

Many evangelical churches and leaders have advocated immigration reform based on the following principles:

- Reducing the backlog for family-based immigration petitions, to more quickly reunite families;
- Providing a new mechanism for lawful entry to the U.S. for those who want to work here, which would drastically reduce illegal immigration;
- Providing a way for those already present in the U.S. to earn legal status by paying a fine, paying any taxes due, and making efforts to learn English; and
- Securing our borders in ways keeping with humanitarian values.