



# Welcoming the Stranger: The Church and Immigration

A statement issued by the Social Justice Commission and  
The Rt. Rev. Dr. Douglas John Fisher, IX Bishop of Western Massachusetts  
September 21, 2015 – Feast of Saint Matthew

*For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink,  
I was a stranger and you welcomed me. --Matthew 25:35*

*Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.  
--Romans 15:7*

• Immigration is one of the most pressing issues of our time. Millions of people worldwide are on the move. Some are migrants, moving from place to place in search of work; others are refugees, forced from their homes because of war, political or religious persecution, extreme poverty, drought, rising seas, natural disasters, or other causes. Often risking their lives in their quest for safety, security, and a better life, waves of men, women, and children – many of them lacking proper documents – stream across national borders and enter the United States, hoping for refuge.

• What is our Christian responsibility to the strangers in our midst? Back in 2006, the Episcopal Church's General Convention passed a resolution that recognizes "the right and duty of a sovereign nation to protect and defend its borders" (2006-A017). Yet in the same resolution the Church also recognized "the plight of refugees, immigrants, and migrants," and committed itself "to welcoming strangers as a matter of Christian responsibility, to advocate for their wellbeing and protection and... to resist legislation and actions which violate our fundamental beliefs as Christians."

• What are our fundamental Christian beliefs about immigration? Christians in the United States begin by remembering that we ourselves are immigrants. This is true for most of us on a literal level: unless we are Native American, our ancestors came from other places. But even more important, this is true for all of us on a spiritual level: as Christians, we trace our heritage back to "a wandering Aramean" who went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien.

• We know what it is to be aliens – to be outsiders who are vulnerable and oppressed – for the Exodus story is our story. Scripture repeatedly enjoins us to treat aliens and outsiders with justice and kindness, because we ourselves have been aliens. We identify with them. We understand their situation from the inside. Our salvation is bound up with theirs.

You shall make this response before the LORD your God:  
"A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien...When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing harsh labor on us, we cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors; the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm... and brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.

--Deuteronomy 26:5-9

Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

--Romans 12:13

When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.

*Leviticus 19:33-34*

Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.

*Hebrews 13:1-2*

- Scripture is full of stories about the blessings that come from welcoming the “stranger.” Abraham and Sarah welcomed three strangers with generous hospitality and received a gift beyond their wildest dreams (Genesis 18:1-15). Ruth recognized that divine love called her to join a new people, and Boaz welcomed her with kindness and generosity (Ruth 1:16, 2:8-9, 14). Moses encouraged his “alien” father-in-law not to return to his homeland but instead to stay with him (Numbers 10:31-32).

- Our desire to create a society in which immigrants are treated justly springs not only from an external sense of right and wrong, but also from an interior understanding of what it is like to feel anxious, unsettled, hungry, homeless, vulnerable and at sea. Empathy, imagination, and our own experiences of loss help us to understand the “heart” of an alien.

- Jesus, the incarnate Son of God, experienced the life of a refugee. He and his parents were forced to flee to Egypt when King Herod sought to kill Israelite children under three years old. Jesus also lived out his ministry as someone on the move, without a settled home. “Foxes have holes,” he said, “and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head” (Matthew 8:20). Jesus felt such deep solidarity with the homeless, the itinerant, and the stranger, that he considered welcoming the stranger to be a sign of entering his Kingdom: “I was a stranger and you welcomed me.” (Matthew 25:35).

- The Risen Christ invites us to experience our essential unity with each other even as we honor and respect our differences. Through the power of the Spirit that he has given us, he draws us into a divine love that transcends differences and yet also honors the particularity of every person and every culture.

- Christianity has a long tradition of welcoming the stranger, extending pastoral care to the vulnerable, and working to build a just society. In a world in which people often compete for scarce resources, hoard the best for themselves, reject those in need, and fear those who are “different,” Christianity offers a radical vision of hospitality that is based on God’s creative, redeeming love for all people, everywhere.

- The Episcopal Church has spoken clearly about the need for just and compassionate policies regarding immigration. For example, General Convention has passed resolutions that urge the humane enforcement and extension of immigration law. Among other actions, it has condemned the use of racial profiling to question immigration status, has urged the equal application of immigration law to same-sex partners, and has advocated for comprehensive immigration reform. (To study these resolutions, visit: [http://www.episcopalarchives.org/cgi-bin/acts/acts\\_topic\\_search.pl?topic=Immigration](http://www.episcopalarchives.org/cgi-bin/acts/acts_topic_search.pl?topic=Immigration)).

You shall not oppress a resident alien; you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.

*Exodus 23:9*

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.

*Luke 10:27*

Then Peter began to speak to them: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to God.

*Acts 10:34*

And through Christ God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

*Colossians 1:20*

• In January 2015, over 100 bishops (including Bishop Douglas Fisher) joined the Presiding Bishop in welcoming the executive action that grants relief from deportation for nearly 5 million undocumented immigrants. The letter expressed thanks "for President Obama's announcement that nearly five million undocumented immigrants will soon be eligible for relief from the threat of deportation." The letter called the executive action "a constructive step toward a system that honors the dignity and intrinsic value of every human being. It will immediately strengthen our nation's communities by allowing immigrant families much fuller participation in American civic and economic life." (see <http://www.episcopalchurch.org/library/article/bishops-offer-support-president%E2%80%99s-immigration-executive-action>)

• As Christians, we believe that when we treat refugees, migrants, and immigrants with justice and kindness, when we seek to reform and heal our country's broken immigration system, and when we advocate for public policies that treat immigrants fairly and with respect, we are ministering to Christ himself.

• Paradoxically, by seeing Christ in the alien and the stranger and by extending compassion to them, we are drawn into the life of the Trinity, in which no one is an alien or a stranger. As we learn to cherish the alien within ourselves and in our midst, we come to discover that all are welcome and all are loved. As individuals and as a society, we become a dwelling place for God.



THE EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF WESTERN MASSACHUSETTS  
"CELEBRATING GOD'S ABUNDANCE"

The Rt. Rev. Dr. Douglas John Fisher,  
*IX Bishop of the Diocese of Western Massachusetts*

**Members of the Social Justice Commission:**

The Rev. Dr. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas, *Missioner for Creation Care*

Ms. Lee Cheek, *Grace Church in the Southern Berkshires*

The Rev. Lisa Green (Co-Chair), *St. John's, Sutton*

The Rev. Dr. Harvey Hill (Co-Chair), *St. David's, Agawam and St. Andrew's, Longmeadow*

The Rev. Lauren J. Holm, *Bethesda Lutheran Church and East Church, Congregational, Springfield*

The Rev. Deacon Beatrice Kayigwa, *Good Shepherd, Clinton*

The Very Rev. James G. Munroe, (Retired) *Christ Church Cathedral, Springfield*

The Rev. Dr. Richard Simpson, *Canon to the Ordinary*

The Rev. Peter Swarr, *St. Mark's, East Longmeadow*

Ms. Maggie Sweeney, *St. James, Greenfield*

Dr. John Zeugner, *St. Luke's, Worcester*

Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.

*Matthew 25:40*

You are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

*Ephesians 2:19-22*

For more information about the Episcopal Church's position on immigration issues, contact Katie Conway, Immigration and Refugee Policy Analyst, [kconway@episcopalchurch.org](mailto:kconway@episcopalchurch.org)