

**Statement on Immigration Reform
Christian Churches Together (U.S.A.)
February 1, 2013
Austin, Texas**

The Christian Churches Together (U.S.A.) gathered in Austin, Texas for its annual meeting to learn about immigration, read Scripture, pray, and discern God's call on our lives to respond to an unjust immigration system. We now call upon people of faith and elected officials in Congress and President Obama to work together to enact just and humane immigration reform legislation in 2013.

As Christian leaders and Christian communities, we engage in this debate as followers of Jesus Christ, who commanded us to "welcome the stranger," (Mt 25:35) and advised that "what you do to the least of my brethren, you do unto me" (Mt. 25:40).

As Christians we believe that the nations will be judged, in part, by the way they treat strangers in their midst. "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left." (Matthew 25: 31,32a). We confess that members of our own faith communities have been complicit in the establishment and reinforcement of our current system through active political engagement and apathetic inaction. Now, as a moral matter, our nation can no longer tolerate an immigration system that exploits migrants, is inhospitable, and fails to offer immigrants the protection of the law.

While immigration is often viewed as an economic, social, or legal issue, it is ultimately a humanitarian and spiritual issue that directly impacts millions of unauthorized immigrants and the entire fabric of our society. The Bible frequently commands us to treat the immigrant justly. Further, every person is created in the image of God and possesses inestimable value. It is therefore paramount that our national immigration system protects the basic human rights and dignity of the human person. Sadly, our current system fails to meet this test and requires comprehensive reform as soon as possible.

The timing of our statement on immigration is ever more poignant given that our country is celebrating the 150th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. However, each day in our congregations and communities we bear witness to the effects of a system that continues the separation of families and the exploitation, abuse, and deaths of migrants. This suffering must end. Therefore, we follow the legacy set before us by Christians and other people of goodwill who called for reforms that led to the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation. We urge our elected officials to enact immigration reform consistent with the following principles and policies:

Pathway to Citizenship

The 11 million families and individuals now in the U.S. without authorization should be given an opportunity to earn citizenship, if the individual chooses. Many have built equities in our nation and have contributed to the economic and social fabric of this country. Such reforms would

ensure that families are not separated and that the undocumented population can fully enjoy the rights and responsibilities of U.S. citizenship.

Family reunification

Family reunification should be the cornerstone of our nation's immigration policy. Immigrant families have helped build this nation economically and socially, and will continue to do so. We support changes to the family-based immigration system, which expedite the reunification of families. Family-based visa categories should not be eliminated or reduced and the current lengthy backlogs should be addressed.

Enforcement and due process

Enforcement measures should be just and include due process protections for immigrants. We support the right of our nation to defend our borders and to ensure the integrity of the workplace through immigration enforcement. However, for over twenty-five years, our nation has pursued an enforcement-only policy toward immigration, with severe humanitarian consequences. At the same time our nation has spent billions of dollars on immigration enforcement, the number of undocumented in the nation has more than tripled. Millions have been incarcerated unnecessarily, thousands of families have been separated, and thousands have died attempting to enter the United States.

We urge Congress to review our enforcement policies and restore due process protections to immigrants and their families in a way that respects their God-given dignity, including reform of our detention laws. The human dignity and image of God has been further violated as a result of the cooperation between local law enforcement and federal immigration agencies that leads to racial profiling of people suspected of being in the U.S. without authorization. Immigration laws should be reformed and implemented in a way that does not facilitate racial profiling. Enforceable detention standards and reforms should be established and include the review of partnerships between the federal government and for-profit prison corporations.

Refugees and Asylum Seekers

Refugees and asylum-seekers should receive special protection, as particularly vulnerable migrants because they are fleeing persecution. The United States has a an obligation to continue to provide protection to ensure refugees and asylum-seekers are able to find safety in the United States through the appropriate processes and not at heightened risk of being returned to their persecutors. There should be improvements to the asylum process to ensure asylum-seekers are not detained upon arrival and given a fair opportunity to express a fear of persecution. There should also be more robust support of the refugee resettlement program and adequate resources to help refugees integrate upon their arrival to the United States. We are also mindful of the millions of families and individuals waiting for resettlement, living, raising families, and dying in temporary refugee camps and the many who perish attempting to reach those camps.

Root Causes

In order to find a long-term solution to the problem of unauthorized immigration, the root causes of such migration should be examined. Persons should be able to find employment in their home countries in order to sustain their families in a place that is free from fear and violence. At a minimum Congress and the Administration should review our international economic policies to

ensure that they do not encourage unauthorized migration and do not eliminate living wage jobs in sending communities. In addition, we must acknowledge our long legacy of dependence on cheap labor to support our way of life at the expense of the dignity of our neighbors.

As Christian Churches Together we recommit ourselves to be promoters and examples of justice, showing hospitality and love for the immigrant, for we know we may be entertaining angels without knowing it. We call for our nation to engage in an immigration debate that is conducted in a civil manner and does not dehumanize immigrants. We will speak out and educate communities about the past and current contributions of immigrants in building and growing this nation. Finally, we will work with our elected officials to ensure that, consistent with the aforementioned policies and principles, the human rights of immigrants are protected in any final legislation.