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PRESS RELEASE

Church leaders urge fundamental immigration reform

February 1, 2013

For Immediate Release

Christian leaders representing the breadth of Christian churches and denominations in the U.S. issued a strong and urgent call today for fundamental immigration reform. The annual meeting of Christian Churches Together released this statement at the close of their four day gathering in Austin, Texas.

The entire CCT meeting, planned a year ago, focused on the challenge of immigration reform, hearing from “dreamers,” a variety of immigrants and experts on immigration issues. Its statement comes as the nation’s political leadership has turned its attention during the past week to this challenge. The CCT leaders said they would engage this debate “as followers of Jesus Christ who commanded us to welcome the stranger.”

“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,” the statement declared.

The diverse group, representing leadership from Catholic, Evangelical/Pentecostal, Historic Protestant, Orthodox, and Historic Black churches, agreed on these unified principles:

- An earned path to citizenship for the 11 million people in the United States without authorization.
- The priority of family reunification in any immigration reform.
- Protecting the integrity of our borders and protecting due process for immigrants and their families.
- Improving refugee protection laws and asylum laws.
- Reviewing international economic policies to address the root causes of unauthorized immigration.

During the course of the Christian Churches Together gathering, the group heard from immigration advocates from evangelical organizations such as World Relief, immigration policy experts at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, legislative advocates serving major Protestant denominations, and leaders from the Hispanic Christian community, among others.

The statement issued today represents the broadest coalition of Christian denominations and groups to address together the urgency of fundamental immigration reform. It will be followed by advocacy to members of Congress from the membership of denominations and groups represented at the Austin meeting.

The full statement is attached.

See www.christianchurchestogether.org, for further information.

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Statement on Immigration Reform
Christian Churches Together in the U.S.A.
February 1, 2013
Austin, Texas

Christian Churches Together in the U.S.A., representing the breadth of Christian churches and denominations in the U.S., gathered in Austin, Texas, for its annual meeting to focus on the challenge of immigration reform. We heard from “dreamers,” a variety of immigrants and experts on immigration issues. Through a process of prayer, reflection and discernment of God’s call, we agreed on a statement that provides principles for just and humane immigration reform. In this hour, as our nation launches a national debate seeking immigration reform, we call upon people of faith, people of good will, elected officials in Congress and the President of the United States 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,” (Matthew 25:35) and advised that, “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)

As Christians we believe that all 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, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. 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, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left." (Matthew 25: 31,32a) We acknowledge 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. As a moral matter, we cannot tolerate an immigration system that exploits migrants, is inhospitable, and fails to offer immigrants the full 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 all persons. Sadly, our current system fails to meet this test and requires comprehensive reform now.

The timing of our statement on immigration is ever more poignant given that our country is celebrating the 150th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. We are reminded that there are those in our nation whose forebears were brought here involuntarily through the unjust institution of slavery. There are also those who lived here long before others arrived who experienced the denial of their basic human rights. Each day in our congregations and communities, we bear witness to the effects of a system that continues this legacy of separation of families and the exploitation, abuse, and deaths of migrants. This suffering must end. Therefore, in our relentless effort to achieve a more perfect union, we urge our elected officials to enact immigration reform consistent with the following principles and policies:

Pathway to Citizenship

The 11 million 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. (Leviticus 19:33-34)

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. (Mark 10:9)

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 that 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. (Exodus 1:1-22)

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 moral 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 are 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. (Matthew 2:13-18)

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 countries. Our country should help to foster job opportunities and respect for human rights in the countries from which many immigrants come. (Isaiah 2:1-4; Micah 4:1-5)

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.” (Hebrews 13:2) 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.