

Immigration Reform

From Missouri IMPACT
March, 2008

from **THE NEW COLOSSUS**

By Emma Lazarus, 1883

Located at the base of the Statue of Liberty

*...And her name Mother of Exiles.
From her beacon-hand glows worldwide welcome;
Her mild eyes command the air-bridged harbor
That twin cities frame.*

*“Keep, ancient land, your storied pomp!”
cries she with silent lips.
“Give me your tired, your poor,
your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”*

The United States of America is a nation of immigrants. More than 99% of Americans have ancestors who came from a different land, both legally and illegally.¹ Missouri IMPACT is an organization of Christians who are concerned about justice issues. It is through our shared ancestral heritage and our unique Christian perspective that Missouri IMPACT seeks a more open, effective, and humanitarian approach to immigration.

As they relate to Missouri public policy and immigration reform, we hold to the following principles:

- **All human beings have the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.**² In order to pursue these rights, people must sometimes “migrate when faced with circumstances such as persecution, drought, famine or pervasive poverty.”³ Most of our ancestors came to America and the ancient Hebrew people immigrated to Egypt for these same reasons.⁴ Conditions such as persecution, drought, famine and extreme poverty still exist in the world, and are especially prevalent in places like Sudan, Iraq, Chad and our neighboring countries in Latin America, where much of the population subsists on less than a dollar a day. Our country should allow these people the possibility to attain life, liberty, and to pursue happiness just as our ancestors were provided this opportunity in this great nation.
- **All human beings have the right not to be discriminated against based on race, color, religion, sex and national origin.**⁵ Some immigration proposals come dangerously close to discriminating against immigration groups. English-only laws have already been ruled unconstitutional by the Supreme Court.⁶ As people of faith, Scripture mandates us: “When an alien lives with you in your land, do not mistreat them. The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born.”⁷ And if people look different, speak a different language or have a different culture, they too have a place before God and in our country.
- **All faith communities have the right to practice their faith publicly.** As people of faith, we cannot discriminate when people come to us in need. God visits us disguised as those who are hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, or in prison, and we practice our faith by serving the needy, regardless of their legal status.⁸ “The New Colossus” reminds us that America also has a history of offering aid and sanctuary to those who need it most. While people of faith are called to uphold the law, when such laws become unjust, we are called to serve the will of

¹ According to the 2000 US Census, less than 0.6% of the current population is Native American.

² The U.S. Declaration of Independence

³ From a letter released by the Missouri Catholic Conference to the Governor, Statewide Officials and State Legislators, dated January 28, 2008.

⁴ Genesis 42:1-11

⁵ Civil Rights Act of 1964

⁶ See *Meyer v. Nebraska*, 262 U.S. 390 (1923).

⁷ Leviticus 19:33-34

⁸ Genesis 18:1-8, Matthew 25:34-40

God rather than the will of humans. We will continue to welcome and serve the marginalized, providing aid and sanctuary whenever necessary.

- **A vibrant, free-market economy is in the best interest of everyone.** A dynamic economy needs a variety of workers, including high-skilled laborers and a large number of unskilled laborers. Immigrants often fill these low-skilled worker positions as they are willing to perform these jobs despite being underpaid, working long hours, not having proper legal protections, and working in unsafe conditions. However, the government only offers 5,000 permanent visas every year to low-skilled laborers despite the overwhelming demand for this labor. Our economy only functions efficiently with their valuable contributions and we need an immigration system that reflects these needs.

In keeping with these principles and as it relates to current and future Missouri legislation, we propose the following solutions:

- **Undocumented immigrants need an opportunity to integrate into the community in which they live.** In other words, they need a path to permanence that is both just and healing. Detaining, deporting, and discrimination are punitive, divisive, and not reconciliatory. We support legislation that allows immigrants to legalize and earn their citizenship.
- **Immigration laws need to be reformed to reflect our economy's needs.** As the need for unskilled labor grows, there needs to be ways for people to come to work in our country consistent with our economy's needs. We are proud of the benefits immigration has provided our country and our country will only grow stronger as we continue to welcome newcomers who make valuable contributions to our economy and society. We support legislation that provides more legal ways for more hardworking immigrants to come to the United States.
- **Missouri should offer basic humanitarian assistance, such as food and health care, without regard to legal status.** While immigration policies are largely a federal issue, humanitarian assistance is a local and personal issue. Immigrants, legal and undocumented, should be afforded the same care, aid, and emergency assistance as others in our society. We support legislation that offers assistance without regard to legal status.

In keeping with these principles and as it relates to current and future Missouri legislation, we reject the following policies:

- **We are against any policies that discriminate based on race, color, religion, sex, and nation origin.** Our country and state do not have official languages, nor should they. We oppose any English-only laws. These laws will only discriminate against those who speak differently and will divide our congregations and communities.
- **We are against any policies that require faith-based aid organizations to verify the immigration status of our neighbors.** This includes any law that requires our organizations to review people's documents or to confirm people's eligibility for basic services based on their legal status. Christian aid organizations need to be allowed to welcome the strangers and not be overburdened with bureaucratic hurdles.
- **We are against any policies that break apart families.** This includes laws that require immediate deportation or detention of undocumented immigrants. In doing so, parents are separated from their children and husbands from their wives. These kinds of policies are merely punitive, not restorative and disproportionately affect vulnerable children, who at many times are here through no fault of their own.