# Christian Ethics Today

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# Risk Is the Cost of Following Jesus

Cody J. Sanders, guest co-editor

Our treatment of immigrants is a frontline concern for the living out of our identity as followers of Jesus in the United States. We live in an era when immigrants in our midst – documented, under documented, and undocumented – are forced into the political center of an intensely divided polis. As the objects of religiously infused political scapegoating, described later in this issue by Jennifer Garcia Bashaw, many immigrants face the full force of the U.S. government. (Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE, became the highest-funded federal law enforcement agency in the country while this special issue of *Christian Ethics Today* was in preparation.)

From rural farming communities across the Midwest to urban centers from coast-to-coast, we know the gifts that immigrants bring into community – not because of what they add to the economy, but because of the gifts their lives add to our communities. However, as Isaac Villegas writes in this issue, "the unrelenting fear of being snatched from loved ones, torn from a household," creates a social circumstance in which *all our lives* in community are diminished, and the lives of our immigrant neighbors are greatly endangered.

This is, of course, not a temporary concern. Pastor Hierald Osorto recounts in this issue an experience of a recent ICE raid on his community, commenting, "After a deputy pushed my colleague to the ground, I found myself wondering *if this is happening in 2025, what will the future hold for our community?*" In the coming decades, climate collapse, rising sea levels, increasingly numerous unpredictable weather catastrophes, widespread drought and famine, and the heating of some regions beyond reasonable human livability will increase the pattern of migrations both within and between countries.

Faith communities across the country are stepping into ministries of solidarity with migrants in their midst – churches like Holy Trinity Lutheran and Saint Paul-San Pablo Lutheran in Minneapolis, and the Border Church / Le Iglesia Fronteriza, a cross-border ministry at the U.S./Mexico border, that you'll read about in the articles that follow. They demonstrate creative and courageous acts of resistance to the violence enacted against immigrants in the U.S.

In the coming days, many more churches will face a decision about their calling as Christ followers: Will they actively support a Christian nationalist agenda intent on fusing empty Christian symbols with the violent power of empire? Will they passively sit idly by in hopes that their placid kindness will be enough to stand against the forces of violence and destruction? Or will they engage in creative and courageous acts of resistance that risk their corporate comfort and security to stand in solidarity with their immigrant neighbors?

Lives will depend on the decisions churches make.

As a minister and a scholar of community care, I can conceive of no other way for a faith community following the way of Jesus to embody that faith than through practices of solidarity and risk for and with our immigrant neighbors. That's why we've dedicated this issue of *Christian Ethics Today* to the subject of immigration, in hopes that faith communities and their leaders – lay and ordained – will find these words resourceful and, perhaps even more importantly, words of *provocation* toward a risk-taking faith praxis in solidarity with our immigrant neighbors.

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The writers you'll encounter in this issue are compassionate, knowledgeable and skillful pastors and professors – some of them immigrants or the children of immigrants – who are courageous practitioners of the way of Jesus. I am privileged to know each of them, and we are all fortunate to take their wisdom with us into our lives and places of service. ■

*Cody J. Sanders is a Baptist minister and associate professor of congregational and community care leadership at Luther Seminary, Saint Paul, MN. He serves on the CET board and as guest co-editor of this issue of Christian Ethics Today.*

# From the Editor…. About This "Special Issue of CET"

We confront persistent and multiple moral and ethical issues daily. As editor of *Christian Ethics Today*, I am never faced with a lack of material. The content of the journal is typically a smorgasbord of articles on a selection of subjects, many readers favoring such a variety of topics.

Occasionally however, we have published "Special Issues" which present a collection of articles on a single topic, taking a deeper dive into that ethical matter of concern. Such is the case with this issue of the journal: the plight of a great number of people living in the United States, who are considered to be here unlawfully (said to be about 11 million people) and are said to be in need of removal. Some have fled war-torn countries and recently arrived seeking asylum.

Others have lived here for decades, working in diverse jobs, with no criminal history, often deeply involved in society, with children and grandchildren born in this country. Many are Christians. Some are United States military veterans. We see them being indiscriminately rounded up by masked government agents, detained, separated from families and communities, and sometimes secretly shipped off to other countries.

One of our regular writers and a member of our board of directors, Cody Sanders, agreed to help me develop an issue of the journal with articles written by a cadre of writers who have special involvement in and knowledge of the subject of immigration. Those whom Cody identified are from among wide and diverse scholarly and ministerial relationships. We asked them to write from their own experiences and using their own exegesis of Biblical passages which speak to the subject and to address the urgency of this crushing issue which dominates much of the social and political discourse today and which affects the lives of so many people.

This collection of essays, written especially for the readers of *Christian Ethics Today*, attempts to help us understand and respond in a faithful, Christ-like manner to the moral issues surrounding immigration, which are of concern to Christian individuals, to the church and to society. ■

Patrick R. Anderson, Editor

**Regarding Footnotes and References**

To accommodate all articles, we have omitted footnotes and references from the printed journal. However, readers can find the article's document, including footnotes, on our website at **www.christianethicstoday.com**

# Neighbors Disappeared

by Isaac Villegas

At a law enforcement conference in 2008, James Pendergraph, the executive director of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's Office of State and Local Coordination, presented the work of his agency to representatives of police and sheriff departments throughout the country. "If you don't have enough evidence to charge someone criminally but you think he's illegal," he said, "we can make him disappear."[1]

Disappearances have been part of the plan for a long while—a plan awaiting implementation on a mass scale, a plan fit for a president with authoritarian aspirations. This past summer, during the first week of June, marauding ICE agents arrested over 700 people in Los Angeles, California. Family members scrambled to figure out the whereabouts of loved ones taken from them.[2] Some are still searching.

Before Pendergraph, as a federal official, boasted about ICE's expertise in disappearing people in 2008, he was the sheriff of North Carolina's Mecklenburg County, a tenure that stretched across the turn of the millennium, from 1994 to 2007. As sheriff, he spearheaded the nation-wide movement among police chiefs and sheriffs to link their city and county offices to the Department of Homeland Security, to enable local officers to coordinate their policing with ICE. Sheriff Pendergraph championed the 287(g) program, a provision in federal law (Section 287(g) of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1996) which allows officers "to detect, detain, and deport" undocumented residents.[3] The law enables the DHS to deputize local law enforcement personnel to act as immigration enforcement police. (Immigration has been a federal matter, not the concern of state law.)

Sheriff Pendergraph jumped at the opportunity to target immigrants in his jurisdiction, which included Charlotte, the most populous city in North Carolina. "These people are coming to our country without documents, and they won't even assimilate," he told a *Charlotte Observer* reporter in 2006.[4] He considered people from Latin America who live in the United States without legal permission to be threats to the social order because they refuse acculturation. Undocumented members of our community, according to Pendergraph, damage social cohesion. They shred our cultural fabric. *These people*, he called them, are unwilling to assimilate.

In the early 2000s, the DHS found North Carolina to be a hospitable state for ramping up their ICE partnerships with city and county law enforcement offices. In a 2010 report, researchers at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill observed that, of all the states in the country, North Carolina had the most county and municipal jurisdictions participate in the federal 287(g) ICE ACCESS program.[5] The study further noted:

> "In addition to the 287(g) Program, the Department of Homeland Security is piloting a similar initiative in the state called Secure Communities and plans to implement this program nationwide over the next four years. As a result, North Carolina is an important laboratory for examining the implementation of local immigration governance."[6]

*"If you don't have enough evidence to charge someone criminally but you think he's illegal," he said, "we can make him disappear."[1]*

North Carolina has been an important site for ICE to experiment with its ability to insinuate itself into local enforcement jurisdictions—to stretch the reach of federal power as far as our legal and political arrangements will allow. In her *Behind Crimmigration: ICE, Law Enforcement, and Resistance in America*, Felicia Arriaga offers a comprehensive analysis of ICE's infiltration throughout localities in North Carolina. "Between 2006 and 2008," she explains, "places like North Carolina became the testing ground for various immigration enforcement practices meant to target the increase of mostly Latinx immigrants."[7] Arriaga also recounts the efforts of communities to organize their resistance to ICE—grassroots struggles to unlink local cooperation with federal "crimmigration" policies.[8]

These communal efforts of political resistance, over a decade, achieved electoral results. In 2018 several sheriff candidates ran on a commitment to cancel 287(g) and Secure Communities partnerships with ICE—and they won, including in some of the largest counties in the state.[9] Gary McFadden's victory in Mecklenburg County attested to the strength of

pro-immigrant political organizing to shift the common sense of the voting public. This was a profound change in popular sentiment when considered in the light of Pendergraph's long incumbency: he won four consecutive sheriff elections before his appointment to a federal position with DHS.[10] As soon as McFadden took over the sheriff's office in December of 2018, he rescinded the 287(g) agreement that Pendergraph had put in place years before, which began ICE's intrusion into the county's law enforcement processes. On Sheriff McFadden's first day on the job, he joined immigrant justice organizers at a Latino bakery where the owner, a Colombian immigrant, had made a sheet cake with a crossed-out "287(g)" written with frosting in the middle. McFadden signed the termination documents for the cooperation agreement then picked up a kitchen knife and cut across the cake, slicing through the 287(g) at the center.[11] There was a new sheriff in town, and his politics of law enforcement did not involve the targeting of undocumented members of the community.

During the first Trump administration, organized resistance to the federal policing of residents' documentation statuses improved the social conditions for immigrants in North Carolina. And, our state discovered, a better life for immigrants has meant a better life for a large cross-section of the population, a liveliness that enriches all of society: the cultural traditions of food and music makers, the reinvigoration of religious life that comes with newcomers to a community, the gift of friendship offered with every new arrival to our neighborhoods, not to mention the economic growth resulting from immigrant labor. According to the nonpartisan NC Budget & Tax Center and Immigration Research Initiative, in 2022 undocumented workers paid $692 million in state and local taxes. The report also notes that North Carolina industries related to food (more than half of crop workers and 14% of restaurant cooks are immigrants, many undocumented) and housing (13% of construction workers are undocumented) would collapse without immigrants, a majority of whom are undocumented.[12]

We all lose when neighbors, when co-workers, when friends, when members of our chosen or biological family have to live under the constant threat of arrest: the unrelenting fear of being snatched from loved ones, torn from a household. Life under the conditions of torment is a diminished existence, which weakens our interrelated communities, the wholeness of our shared lives, the dependencies that draw us into processes of mutuality.[13] What wounds one part of our community makes all of us wince. Distress ripples through the relationships that sustain our lives. The pain of deportation, the trauma of disappearances, screams through the social body.

Despite the realities of our connectedness—including the goodness of life in communion with others, as well as the economic health of our society—the Republican-led North Carolina legislature is currently facilitating President Trump's agenda by means of a new law that contravenes local law enforcement priorities.[14] In order to push the federal administration's anti-immigrant strategies, the GOP majority crafted a piece of legislation designed to undermine county and city policies that have restricted DHS involvement in their communities—like Sheriff McFadden's refusal to cooperate with ICE. To pass their law, the state GOP representatives needed a member of the Democratic caucus to join their side, giving them the three-fifths supermajority required to override the governor's veto. Representative Carla Cunningham, whose district includes Mecklenburg County, broke with her party to give Republicans the vote they needed for the bill. City, county, and state law enforcement agencies are now forced to cooperate with ICE, despite the will of residents to exclude immigration concerns from the purview of their police departments.

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Recognizing that her vote was an affront to her Democratic colleagues, Rep. Cunningham asked to address the NC House from the floor, to offer an explanation. "I am ADOS, American Descendents of Slaves. I am a Black American, and I am an American," Cunningham introduced herself to the legislative body. "As a people, we need to recognize that it's not just the numbers that matter but also where the immigrants come from and the culture they bring with them." Because, she continued, "all cultures are not equal." People from other cultures (lesser cultures?) "must assimilate," which the current type of immigrant refuses to do, Cunningham claimed, noting that she considers the maintenance of distinct languages to be destructive for social cohesion. "Do you think I can go to another country," she continued, "and use the language I choose and then tell that country that you must

speak my language? That is not going to happen." Her focus on a national language as fundamental for her sense of peoplehood follows the lead of President Trump's executive order in March: "It is therefore long past time that English is declared as the official language of the United States," he announced. "A nationally designated language is at the core of a unified and cohesive society."[15]

In Rep. Cunningham's defense of her vote, she repeated nationalist right-wing talking points regarding demographic change and cultural decline. This was her "unapologetic truth," which she offered as a call to "wake up," for citizens to recognize global migration patterns—regardless of lawful or unlawful migration—as exploitative and abusive of U.S. peoplehood. "It's time to turn the conveyer belt off," because the current flow of migration is "destabilizing our communities," she argued. "A large number of people entering a country can change it forever." Her claim to belonging was the forced labor of her enslaved forebearers whose sweat is in the soil of this country. "It was my ancestors who came over as slaves, built this country with the strain on their backs, the sweat pouring from their bodies in the rice fields, the cotton fields and tobacco farms, for this country." The coerced investment of her people into the productive power of the United States has issued her the rights and privileges of ownership which, she believes, authorizes her to exclude others from the cultural and political processes of making and re-making our society. "Today, if you ask me to line up behind another group of people to raise awareness about their plight, I unapologetically say no."[16]

Rep. Cunningham's demand for the cultural assimilation of immigrants—"they must assimilate"—echoed Sheriff Pendergraph's statement from nearly a decade ago: "These people…won't even assimilate." Their claim about immigrants as unassimilable people is part of what Leo Chavez has identified as "The Latino Threat Narrative," a discursive practice that imagines Central and South Americans in the United States as cultural and political invaders, dangerous to social life. In *The Latino Threat: How Alarmist Rhetoric Misrepresents Immigrants, Citizens, and the Nation*, Chavez tracks the development of this narrative from the late 20th century into the 21st, as expressed by media pundits, public intellectuals, and political leaders—a narrative which Chavez summarizes as follows:

> The Latino Threat Narrative characterizes Latinos as unable or unwilling to integrate into the social and cultural life of the United States. Allegedly, they are prone to criminality, they do not learn English, and they seal themselves off from the larger society, reproducing cultural beliefs and behaviors antithetical to a modern life… Latinos are represented as an unchanging people, standing outside the currents of history, merely waiting for the opportunity to revolt and to reconquer land that was once theirs. They live to destroy social institutions such as medical care and education. They dilute the privileges and rights of citizenship for legitimate members of society.[17]

Cultural difference poses an existential threat, according to this fantasy. Groups of people in the United State who communicate in Spanish instead of English signal, according to this myth, the disintegration of civic life. "Latinos are represented as societal threats, thus causing them to be cast as illegitimate members of the community and undermining their claims for social and cultural citizenship," Chavez lays bare the ideology expressed in the anti-immigrant politics of leaders like Pendergraph and Cunningham.[18]

The DHS is using this political vision in their advertising campaign to convince people to work for ICE.

*"Latinos are represented as societal threats, thus causing them to be cast as illegitimate members of the community and undermining their claims for social and cultural citizenship,"*

To drum up interest—and to stoke the fervor among nationalists—the DHS media account on X posted a series of images that characterize immigrants as threats to the cultural heritage of the United States. The post on June 11, 2025, was a cartoon of Uncle Sam, outfitted in his patriotic stars and stripes trousers, coattails, and top hat—a figure popularized for military recruitment during the early 20th-century World Wars now repurposed for a paramilitary agency. In the post Uncle Sam is nailing up an enlistment poster: "Help Your Country… and Yourself…" And below the poster, there is this injunction in all caps: "REPORT ALL FOREIGN INVADERS."[19] In July, the DHS account posted a picture of a painting of a young couple gazing at an infant cradled in the mother's arms, the three of them in a covered wagon—settlers who appear to be of white European descent, part of a caravan of pioneers headed West. The text above the painting reads, "Remember your Homeland's Heritage."[20] In August the post was straightforward: "Serve your

country! Defend your culture! No undergraduate degree required!" with a link to Join.ICE.Gov. at the bottom.[21] These posts are a nostalgic appeal for the predominance of Euro-nationalist culture, which requires the displacement of other-than-white immigrants—that is, for some among us to be disappeared. Thus, the ideological need to enlist citizens into ICE's paramilitary force, for conducting military operations in our neighborhoods: at grocery and construction supply stores, in our judicial courts and city parks, outside schools and churches and workplaces—to hunt people, members of our community, that our federal government has decided should be considered and treated as enemies.[22]

We are living in Carl Schmitt's world. He was the Nazi jurist who designed a theory of the state befitting of Hitler's rise to power. Schmitt focused his political theory on the need for an authoritarian statesman to secure peace on behalf of a nation—the role of a sovereign leader "in determining definitively what constitutes public order and security, [and] in determining when they are disturbed," he writes in *Political Theology*, a book he published in 1922.[23] According to Schmitt's political vision, the people must entrust their leader with the duty of identifying and neutralizing threats to their wellbeing. "He [the leader as sovereign] decides whether there is an extreme emergency as well as what must be done to eliminate it," which includes, according to Schmitt, the suspension of the legal order, the constitution, for the sake of the common good.[24]

A decade later, in 1932, Schmitt argues in *The Concept of the Political* that fundamental to the political life of a people is discernment regarding who counts as a friend and who counts as an enemy. "The specific distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy."[25] The perseverance of a people depends on this determination, he insists, thus the need to remain vigilant. "Each participant is in a position to judge whether the adversary intends to negate his opponent's way of life and therefore must be repulsed or fought in order to preserve one's own form of existence"—to ensure "tranquility, security, and order."[26] To survive, Schmitt contends, a people must discern and organize against the "domestic enemy."[27]

Our political moment is Schmittian. From elected leaders in state legislatures to those in the federal government, politicians have decided that targeting undocumented immigrants is a winning strategy for the consolidation of their power: immigrants as unassimilable aliens, immigrants as destabilizing the social order, immigrants as imperiling our homeland's cultural heritage. Political leaders have discovered that to categorize immigrants as foreign invaders, as domestic enemies, succeeds in whipping up the support of citizens who are zealous for a nationalist agenda—an agenda that requires the invention of an enemy people, the migrant as a demographic threat, in order to cohere a diverse population around the United States as a nationalist project. Despite immigrants' vital contributions, federal agents are deporting undocumented residents en masse, by the hundreds of thousands.[28] According to Rep. Cunningham, their plight is not her plight, their endangered lives have nothing to do with her concerns and should not be the concern of U.S. citizens. To disappear people is necessary for the common good—a commons that demands the violence of the state, organized against our neighbors.

When Jesus is asked about the greatest commandment, he tells his interlocutors to love God with all their hearts, souls, and minds—and, he adds: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:31, Matthew 22:39, cf. Leviticus 19:18). To love God and to love our neighbors—those interrelated loves are basic to Christian life, their coupling is the basis of Christian ethics. To love our neighbors with the love of God—and to love God in our love for our neighbors—has nothing to do with documentation status, nothing to do with ethnic or racial identities, nothing to do with sharing a culture or sense of peoplehood. In the Gospels, Jesus does not ask his followers to check their neighbor's residency papers first, to verify a person's status within legal frameworks.

Nationalists—Christian or otherwise—are promulgating a political imagination that sacralizes the bonds of citizenship: that is, a sacrosanct belonging, an inviolable identity, that short-circuits our ethical deliberation. These nationalist presumptions attempt to relieve us from our nagging feelings of care and concern for undocumented others. Nationalism posits a sectarian ethic, an identitarian politic, that tries to silence the biblical call to love neighbors, all of them.

Biblical faith is a style of life in which we relearn our political relations. To belong to Christ is to put ourselves in a position, in terms of our solidarities, to recognize and abide with the Spirit of God—as we care for one another, regardless of a person's documentation status. ■

*Isaac Villegas is an ordained Mennonite minister, a contributing editor for* The Christian Century *magazine, and the author of* Migrant God: A Christian Vision for Immigrant Justice. *He grew up in the U.S. Southwest as the child of Latin American immigrants and now lives in North Carolina.*

# Accompaniment

David Larson-Martínez

*Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, "So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow." Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life, and came to Beer-sheba, which belongs to Judah; he left his servant there. But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: "It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors." Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, "Get up and eat." He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again. The angel of the LORD came a second time, touched him, and said, "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you." He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God (1 Kings 19:1-8, NRSV).*

I remember going to sleep in a daze after having spent the humid, summer day in tears. It was July 3, 2011, and I was coming to terms with the recently passed Indiana House Bill (HB) 1402. I allowed the always-too-early pitter pattering of freedom fireworks to mask the quiet sobs of my life unraveling as I buried my face into the pillow. HB-1402 prohibited non-U.S. citizens living in Indiana from paying in-state tuition at state colleges and universities. Almost overnight, my full-ride scholarship to Indiana University-Bloomington (with its ideas of International Business) vanished like a dream. I had no way of paying full, out-of-state tuition and no longer had time to apply for any other kind of financial aid. Two nights after HB-1402 had been signed into law, I felt like my life was ending even before I could become an adult. The Independence Day fireworks of the ensuing days only seemed to mock me as I spent long nights in worry.

Having spent my formative adolescent years among the corn and soybean fields of rural, central Indiana, I was no stranger to the anti-immigrant realities which had led the Indiana legislature to choose a draconian response to non-citizen students within the Hoosier state. I spent much of my teenaged life being told by adults to not speak my native language in public spaces, hearing local leaders spewing falsities about immigrants from local radio stations, and being met by callous sermons concerning unregulated immigration from Christian pulpits. These experiences taught me that those in power may often choose to respond in negative ways to those they deem as threatening to their way of life. In my lived experience, the Jezebels of our time are not those who are committed to the polytheism of power, but rather the ones who want to keep power within the one leading structure: White Supremacy.

As I have reflected on my adolescent experience, I have come to assert that followers of Jesus are called to accompany those who are experiencing exhaustion at the hands of those in power. So, what did it look like for someone to offer me a cake baked on hot stones and water?

After the sleepless nights following the passage of HB-1402 I reached out to my pastor, the Reverend Joshua Burkholder. I needed someone who could pray alongside me, and as we met for prayer, he asked why I was so physically distraught. I shared with him all that had happened at the Indiana legislature, and how I felt that my life was crumbling around me. He listened quietly and offered a prayer. After we prayed, he asked if he could share my story with admission office folks to whom he was connected at his alma mater. I said yes. And before I knew it, I had a meeting set up with Phyllis Larson Schroeder at Valparaiso University. She helped me navigate the labyrinth of higher education costs and helped me access financial aid from the private institution which was not bound by HB-1402. By the end of that very summer, I was enrolled in classes and set off to rebuild my dreams. This was all thanks to the cakes and water gifted to me by followers of Jesus when all I wanted to do was give up.

I remember going to sleep in a daze on the night of November 8, 2016, when President Donald Trump was elected for his first term in office. I was not surprised by the outcome, having lived in a small, rural town the year immediately preceding the U.S. presidential elections. I had watched pro-Trump signs pop up on virtually every corner as he made his way to the White

House. I was, instead, deep in a daze of wondering what would happen to my dreams of continuing with my education of graduate-level classes and becoming a pastor.

By that time, I had been gifted a full-ride academic scholarship from my denomination (the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America) called the *Fund for Leaders* which necessitated my going through our ordination process alongside our Master of Divinity program. However, as I suspected (and would confirm by the end of my first year in seminary), our ordination process required any individual attempting to go through it to be legally employable. As immigration policies changed overnight in the first Trump presidency, my legal status ebbed and flowed alongside that of thousands of others. This meant that I was not legally able to be employed, not able to continue through with the ordination process, and losing my full-ride funding. Once again, I felt like the life I had been working towards was ending.

Having spent my young adult years working alongside Phyllis Larson Schroeder at Valparaiso University to cobble together financial aid packages, I was no stranger to needing to pivot. I had spent my university years being told no by scholarship committees who were looking only for U.S. citizens to whom to gift funds, declined by internship sites open only to those with long-term employability goals, and being ousted by those dearest to me for simply being my own self. These experiences taught me that the institutions in power which we humans have created may often choose to acquiesce to the status quo. This hardly ever serves those who are most in need. In my lived experience, the Jezebels of our time are not those who care about proper worship, but rather those who idolize the institutions which have kept them and their own in places of privilege: White Supremacy.

As I have reflected on my young adult experience, I have come to assert that followers of Jesus are called to accompany those who are experiencing exhaustion in their relationship to institutions in power. So, what did it look like for someone to offer me a cake baked on hot stones and water?

After the sleepless nights of not being able to complete my legal employability requirements for my denomination's ordination track and therefore choosing to relinquish my full-ride scholarship (as if that truly were the choice), I reached out to a seminary pastor, the Reverend Angela Shannon. I needed someone who could pray alongside me and, as we met for prayer, she asked why I was so physically distraught. I shared with her all that had happened in the first months of the new presidency, and how I felt that my life was crumbling around me. She listened quietly and offered a prayer. After we prayed, she asked if he could share my story with admission office folks whom he was connected to at the seminary. I said yes. And before I knew it, I had a meeting set up with Richard Webb at Luther Seminary. He would help me navigate the labyrinth of higher education costs and help me access financial aid from the seminary itself which was not bound up by employability/ordination processes. By the end of my fourth year in seminary, I was busy rebuilding my dreams of becoming a pastor. This was all thanks to the cakes and water gifted to me by followers of Jesus when all I wanted to do was give up.

I remember going to sleep in a daze the night of November 26, 2024, before I was to present myself for an H1B1 Visa interview at the U.S. Consulate in Monterrey, Mexico. I had had to take a melatonin pill after having spent hours tossing and turning with stress. The next day, a consular official would make the decision whether I was allowed to return to my life in the U.S. or not. I had prepped for this moment

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alongside my colleagues and hired lawyers. We had talked through the best- and worst-case scenarios. As night deepened, my mind filled up with the possibilities and H1B1 Visa would bring, and my body held the dread of yet another well-thought-out possibility crumbling. Sooner or later, the strange city and its desert quietness lulled me to sleep.

Having spent my working adult life in a variety of immigration statuses, I was no stranger to all that could go wrong and the seeming impossibility of what we were trying to accomplish for me at that moment. I had been told resounding 'nos' by leaders from the national (ELCA Churchwide) office and the local-to-me-in-its-processes (Indiana-Kentucky ELCA Synod) office. They had reached out to their own trusted immigration lawyers who had said that there was no case to be made for me and, at the first 'nos,' these leaders had thrown up their arms in surrender and told me they had done all they could. These experiences taught me that it is often those who can envision

beyond the accepted structures, who are poised to live into that world in which we are all made equal. In my lived experience, the Jezebels of our time are those who bow to the gods of polite niceties which ask little from us and end up taking our souls along with them: White Supremacy.

As I have reflected on my adult working experience, I have come to assert that followers of Jesus are called to accompany those who are experiencing exhaustion at not being able to make headway in systems and structures not created for them. So, what did it look like for someone to offer me a cake baked on hot stones and water?

After that sleepless night in Monterrey, Mexico, and following a successful interview at the U.S. Consular office, I reached out to my pastor, the Reverend Ingrid C.A. Rasmussen at 10:45 a.m. Central Time. I emailed her saying, "It is with joy (and unbelief) that I share that the consular official in Monterrey has approved my H1B Visa … best case-scenario!" Pastor Ingrid had been the individual who continued to refuse to take 'no' for an answer and was key in finding similarly minded folks. She had sat with me in U.S.C.I.S. offices, had been on numerous calls with our lawyers, had requested patience when we needed to attend to immigration pieces instead of our normal work, and had encouraged an abundant generosity from the congregation. And it was in her own writing that she mentions that this was only the beginning of this journey alongside me. She reminded the congregation that, if they were to see me through the adjusting of my immigration status in the U.S. into permanent residency, they were committing to ebbs and flows of immigration at least until 2040. This reality will take all the cakes and all the water we can muster to gift, over and over again, as followers of Jesus when all I/we want to do is give up. This time under a solitary broom tree begun in July 2011 may end with joy in November of 2040.

Get up and eat with all of us, otherwise the journey will be too much for everyone. Let us go in the strength that only God can give. ■

*David Larson-Martínez is originally from Cuernavaca, Morelos, and feels most at home in the Twin Cities of Minnesota. He is a consecrated deacon of the Lutheran Diaconal Association and an ordained pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.*

## Many Thanks

We are grateful to our writers, having been greatly blessed by the thoughts, expressions, and illuminations they give us.

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We are grateful for our supporters, whose gifts enable us to publish.

We welcome more writers, more readers, and more supporters.

# The Morning Everything Changed

Hierald E. Osorto

On June 3, 2025, everything changed in our neighborhood.

That Tuesday morning, one of my parishioners burst into my office waving her phone. The photo she had received left me speechless: an army tank parked right outside a local taquería, just blocks from our church. How could it be true? Our vibrant *Latine* community in Minneapolis suddenly facing the presence of armored tanks and federal agents? I rushed out of the church, my heart racing, desperate to confirm that this was a piece of photoshopped propaganda designed to provoke fear.

At the intersection of Lake Street and Bloomington Avenue an unsettling reality unfolded before my eyes. Three armored vehicles blocked the streets. Federal agents armed with assault rifles and riot gear stood guard beneath an awning promoting the slogan: "Make tacos, not walls." Neighbors assembled in the road; I joined my voice to the rising protest against this display of government hostility.

Later, I would learn that eight federal warrants related to money laundering and labor trafficking had been executed across Hennepin County that day. In seven of those instances, federal agents—among them Homeland Security Investigations—collected evidence efficiently and inconspicuously. A spectacle of militarized force was reserved for the eight warrants outside of Los Cuatro Milpas restaurant.

Those tanks stayed on our streets for three hours, and so did the growing number of protesters. Deputies from the Hennepin County Sheriff's Office arrived to do crowd control, while officers from the Minneapolis Police Department—and eventually the Chief of Police—looked on. In order to disperse protesters, the County's agents eventually escalated tactics to tear gas and physical force. After a deputy pushed my colleague to the ground, I found myself wondering, *If this is happening in 2025, what will the future hold for our community?*

**St. Paul's-San Pablo Church**

The story of St. Paul's–San Pablo Lutheran Church (ELCA) is a story about immigrant communities. In the late-1800s, Swedish immigrants founded the church as a spiritual home and a hub for connection among new arrivals to the United States. Rooted in the Phillips neighborhood, where over half of the population speaks languages other than English, the congregation embraced a calling to bilingual ministry with Spanish-speaking neighbors (mostly immigrants from Mexico) in the early 2000s. For over 135 years, St. Paul's–San Pablo has accompanied individuals willing to traverse borders and surmount obstacles in pursuit of a better life in this country.

When the congregation called me to serve as their pastor in 2021, I had already spent a lifetime navigating the shifting tides of government policies towards immigrants. I have cousins named "Ronald" and "Reagan" in honor of the president who signed the 1986 bill granting amnesty to nearly three million undocumented immigrants, and I cared for my little brothers when my stepfather was held in detention in the late 1990s. Yet in this decade, the stakes feel higher, the mood more urgent.

*After a deputy pushed my colleague to the ground, I found myself wondering, If this is happening in 2025, what will the future hold for our community?*

After the 2024 presidential election, St. Paul's–San Pablo decided to invest intentionally in ways to cope with the stresses incurred by living in the U.S. as an under-documented immigrant. We installed a shower and laundry facilities in our building so that we could extend hospitality to newly-arrived neighbors. We strengthened relationships with a local law firm who counseled members on their legal rights and proceedings in their immigration cases. We've brainstormed with our leaders how to foster community well-being and resilience.

Now, if you had asked a year ago whether our ministry addressing the increasingly anti-immigrant climate would have involved acupuncture, I would have responded with skepticism. However, over last spring and summer I have witnessed Christ's healing ministry manifest through monthly offerings of complementary traditional medicine.

Picture this: gentle lighting and soothing melodies create an atmosphere of serenity. Massage tables and

zero-gravity chairs are set up in the sanctuary, inviting neighbors to experience tranquility. Skilled practitioners provide free sessions of acupuncture, Reiki, or cupping therapy, compassionate practices that alleviate the profound stress experienced by undocumented immigrants. I have observed the palpable sense of relaxation exhibited by individuals after engaging in these holistic treatments, as though they are releasing burdens they have long carried. (If it's still hard to picture, I encourage you to look through the photographs that accompany Giovanna Dell'orto's *Associated Press* article from May 2, 2025, titled, "Altar Acupuncture: A Minneapolis Church Brings Well-Being Sessions to its Migrant Ministry".)

**Violent Shock Waves and Communal Strength**

The militarized violence of June 3 sent shock waves through the city, but that day also affirmed my community's strength. Amid the turmoil I watched neighbors come together to push back against bullying, many people documenting the scene. I observed a dear colleague of a predominantly white congregation courageously confront the Chief of Police. I felt a power in collective action that pulsed with the heartbeat of God, who cares for us and calls us to stand against injustice.

The appearance of tanks on our streets caught me off guard, but I won't submit to fear. I don't know what the future will hold for my community, but I do know that the people of St. Paul's–San Pablo won't be cowed. We will continue to adapt our model of accompaniment and address stress more holistically. We will dedicate ourselves to fostering belonging and welcome in our community, so that all of our neighbors can find sanctuary and solidarity within our walls. We will reclaim our inherent power and faithfully embody the compassion of Christ in our interactions with one another.

I invite you to imagine along with St. Paul's–San Pablo Lutheran Church how the Spirit is dreaming up possibilities beyond the prevailing climate of oppression, silence, and fear. What kind of faith might flourish when Christians in the United States confront lies with truth, both in private relationships and in the public square? What kind of hope might anchor U.S. Christians to withstand ever-increasing anti-immigrant hostility in every level of government? What kind of love might be born in relationships of accompaniment between your congregation or community and immigrants in your neighborhood or across the nation?

Invading tanks are etched into my mind; their likely return haunts me. Nevertheless, I resolutely resist the terror that threatens to override my nervous system. I rest in the embrace of the Divine, whose grace is all-encompassing and for each person, without exception. That grace guides me back into my immigrant-led community, where we are stewarding with love the incredible gifts we hold together. God has called us for this time, and we are summoning the courage to be—in words dedicated to the memory of Monseñor Óscar Romero—prophets of a future not our own. I hope you will risk that future with us. ■

*Hierald Osorto is currently the lead pastor of St. Paul's–San Pablo Lutheran Church, a bilingual ELCA congregation located in the heart of South Minneapolis, MN. Before moving to Minneapolis, he worked at Ithaca College as the Executive Director for Student Equity and Belonging, as well as the founding Director of Religious and Spiritual Life. He holds a Master of Divinity from Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary and a Graduate Certificate in Theology and Decolonization from the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo, Brazil.*

*God has called us for this time, and we are summoning the courage to be—in words dedicated to the memory of Monseñor Óscar Romero—prophets of a future not our own. I hope you will risk that future with us.*

George Washington: *"The bosom of America is open to receive not only the Opulent and respected Stranger, but the oppressed and persecuted of all Nations and Religions; whom we shall welcome to a participation of all our rights and privileges…"*

# When Churches Are No Longer Sanctuaries: An Immigrant Theologian-Pastor's Reflection

Eunil David Cho

As a Korean American, I grew up in an immigrant church, and I still serve one today. For many immigrants, the church is far more than a religious institution. It is a lifeline. It is where members gather not only on Sundays, but also daily for morning prayer. It is where we eat Korean food after service, speak our mother tongue, and celebrate our cultural traditions. Above all, it is a place of belonging, a sanctuary where different generations of Korean immigrants experience safety, dignity and support as they navigate the precarious realities of life in America.

Recently, I heard the alarming news that ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) agents had entered the property of a Korean immigrant church in my hometown. Armed and masked, they were seeking "illegal" immigrants, intimidating clergy, staff and lay leaders who had gathered to worship God. Feeling anxious and upset, I immediately thought of my parents and church elders. I had known that ICE raids have been taking place in places of worship, especially within immigrant congregations. But the news from my hometown struck me intensely. In that moment, my immigrant church no longer felt safe. It was as if I had lost my sense of home completely, left wrestling with the haunting question: *If we cannot feel safe in our churches, where can we go?*

Unfortunately, ICE agents have been targeting migrants, both with and without documentation, in and around places of worship across the country. Churches are no longer sanctuaries. Hispanic and Spanish-speaking congregations, in particular, are experiencing the hardest impact nationwide.[1] Out of fear of immigration raids, many of these churches have seen in-person attendance decline drastically and are now rethinking about how worship services are delivered.[2] In response to this disorienting situation, for instance, Bishop Alberto Rojas of the Diocese of San Bernardino told his diocese of about 1.2 million people that they could stay home on Sundays to avoid Mass as concerns about immigration sweeps loom.[3] Much like the time of the pandemic, alarmed church members are relying on online platforms to attend worship and on smaller gatherings for Bible studies and prayer.

While responding to this crisis and caring for their members, pastors and church leaders themselves are not safe from ICE raids either. On July 21, many were shocked to learn that Daniel Fuentes Espinal, a pastor from Maryland, was arrested by ICE while visiting a local restaurant. After his arrest, Fuentes Espinal was taken to the Winn Correctional Facility in Louisiana. The reason for his arrest was a visa overstay. Fuentes Espinal had been trying for many years to obtain a green card for permanent residency while he and his family endured what they described as a "bureaucratic nightmare."[4]

Recently, on August 18, Pastor Fuentes Espinal was finally granted bond and released from the detention center. His family and his congregation at Iglesia Del Nazareno Jesus te Ama were overjoyed to welcome him back. His family friend, Len Foxwell, explained that they would continue working to secure the pastor a green card. "Pastor Fuentes Espinal is a pillar of our community…He has been here for 24 years, has never been charged with a crime and, more importantly, he's been the moral and spiritual center of a tight-knit community on the Eastern Shore," Foxwell said.[5] Foxwell's words underscore how Pastor Fuentes Espinal's arrest was a traumatizing experience, not only for him and his family, but for the entire community that he has faithfully served for more than two decades. In a time when churches are no longer sanctuaries, the potential loss of the presence of spiritual leaders adds further complexity and depth to the fear and uncertainty that many immigrant communities of faith are experiencing today.

*"Pastor Fuentes Espinal is a pillar of our community…He has been here for 24 years, has never been charged with a crime and, more importantly, he's been the moral and spiritual center of a tight-knit community on the Eastern Shore," Foxwell said.[5]*

**Refuge, Respectability and Resources**

For immigrant communities, religion is central. Particularly in North America, congregations are more than places of worship; they function as social, cultural and socioeconomic anchors in the lives of immigrants. American sociologist Charles Hirschman explains that immigrant congregations in North America serve three primary functions: (1) *refuge*, (2) *respectability*, and (3) *resources*.[6] First, migrants attend and join churches to seek *refuge*, filling psychological voids and finding a sense of belonging. Hirschman notes that "the search for refuge by immigrants has been for physical safety as well as for psychological comfort."[7] Second, churches affirm the *respectability* of immigrants. For historically minoritized communities in the United States, churches have been places that "provide respectability or opportunities for status recognition and social mobility that is denied in the broader society." [8] Third, churches have played a central role in meeting the practical needs of immigrant communities by providing a wide range of *resources*.

Nevertheless, in a time like this—when members are unable to worship together out of deep fear and may permanently lose their spiritual leaders—churches can no longer fulfill these roles. This presents a new challenge for immigrant churches. Throughout the long history of exclusion and marginalization, churches were among the few places upon which immigrants could rely for help in navigating sociocultural and political challenges. Churches were once considered "sensitive places," alongside hospitals and schools, where ICE officers were restricted from making arrests. However, the current administration revoked this policy on January 21, 2025,[9] and now ICE raids may invade and disrupt places once regarded as sanctuaries. For centuries, churches were seen as relatively safer spaces. That is no longer the case, at least in the United States today. Churches are increasingly unable to fulfill their pastoral and prophetic roles of offering refuge, respectability and resources to their members and surrounding communities.

**An Invitation for Non-Immigrant Churches**

Then what can churches that do not identify as "immigrant churches" do to respond? Of course, many ecclesial and denominational bodies have protested, rallied, chanted and prayed publicly in response to these inhumane raids. Yet, in the face of today's renewed ICE enforcement actions and immigration raids, such public witness can also be risky. Christian pastor and immigration activist Doug Pagitt explained, "Up until this term, churches and faith leaders were considered off-limits for ICE agents, so it was easier [for churches] to stand up and be pro-immigrant…The fact that churches are not off-limits anymore and ICE can enter churches puts a whole other burden on this situation." [10]

While public protest and marches remain important for raising awareness and holding the government accountable, Pagitt emphasized that what immigrant churches need most at this time is *community building* and *solidarity* through relationships and partnerships, sharing and providing "information, resources, and support" so that these congregations in crisis can continue to serve as sanctuaries for their communities.[11] Indeed, many immigrant congregations are already taking significant steps to make worship and fellowship safer, especially for undocumented members, removing service times from websites and signage, increasing security measures, creating a rapid response team, and teaching people their constitutional rights both at home and in the congregation. In other words, immigrant churches are already taking extraordinary measures to protect their sanctuaries.

Here lies the invitation for non-immigrant faith communities: If we truly believe God calls us to welcome the stranger, protect the vulnerable, and love our neighbors, then we must take the time to get to know immigrant church pastors and leaders in our local areas. Connect with them through your presbytery, diocese or conference, listen to their stories, and discern together how you can meet their needs. Although immigrant churches may appear similar from the outside, their racial, ethnic and cultural particularities mean they experience the same crisis in different ways. For example, Spanish-speaking congregations and Korean immigrant churches are likely facing this reality through distinct challenges, requiring different kinds of responses and support from other faith communities.

*Throughout the long history of exclusion and marginalization, churches were among the few places upon which immigrants could rely for help in navigating sociocultural and political challenges.*

Solidarity begins with small but intentional steps: listening, learning and showing up. Non-immigrant churches do not need to have all the answers, but they do need to be present, offering space, sharing resources and lending their voices alongside immigrant con-

gregations, thereby helping to reduce the fear they are experiencing. The message immigrant churches need to hear is not "Don't be afraid!" but rather "If you are afraid, we are here to listen and help." If immigrant churches are already taking extraordinary measures to protect their communities, then non-immigrant churches must take extraordinary measures of solidarity. In a time when fear threatens to close doors, God is calling the Church to open new ones. This is not only an act of justice, but also an act of faith, trusting that God's Spirit moves most powerfully when we stand together in radical love. ■

*Here lies the invitation for non-immigrant faith communities: If we truly believe God calls us to welcome the stranger, protect the vulnerable, and love our neighbors, then we must take the time to get to know immigrant church pastors and leaders in our local areas.*

*Rev. Dr. Eunil David Cho is assistant Professor of Spiritual Care and Counseling at Boston University School of Theology. He is also an ordained Minister of Word and Sacrament and served as moderator (2023–2024) of the Synod of the Mid-Atlantic in the Presbyterian Church (USA). He is the author of* Undocumented Migration as a Theologizing Experience *(Brill, 2024).*

## The New Colossus

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.

**"Keep, ancient lands, 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!"**

Emma Lazarus 1883, engraved on the base of the Statue of Liberty

# Called to Welcome: Immigration, Theology and Our National Soul

Libby M. Grammer

I recently preached a series on Christian hospitality and, as we explored passages in the Gospel of Luke together to consider what being welcoming as Christ was welcoming looks like today, I recalled with church members the special concern God has for the "least of these." Now, the "least of these" could be lots of people in our society – many are handed harder lots in life and need the care and support of others. In our scriptures, however, there are special classes of people who are considered marginal to the wider society whom God has called us to tend specifically: widows, orphans and strangers – the poorest and most often neglected. This trifecta of special care finds roots in many of our Hebrew scriptures and in the New Testament.

As church leaders find ourselves mired in a national debate about the topic of immigration, we are confronted with our scriptural mandate to take special care of the stranger – the immigrant – among us—while simultaneously living in a far different society from our Hebrew scriptures. What's a pastor or church leader to do?

As a Christian ethicist, I have spent many years pondering *how* we ought to think about topics – not simply *what* we ought to think about them. When it comes to immigration, there are two main methods of framing the topic:[1]

1. Primarily an issue of the rule of law
2. Primarily a human issue

If immigration is primarily a *legal* issue, we are asking questions like, "What is the law?" and "Are people following it?" We hear people who see it this way say things like: "People just need to come the right way and follow the law. Just do it the right way!"

If current laws are not followed – or at least not to the extent we'd like them to be – then the people involved become "criminals" without any reference to other driving forces behind their not following the law. The focus for immigration becomes enforcement of laws with little analyzing of the driving forces behind why immigrants might not be following current laws or the impact of the laws on human lives.

If, however, we frame this issue as a primarily *human* issue, then we begin with questions like, "Who are the people involved, and how do immigration laws affect them?"

If our focus is on the actual people involved, then we are more likely to care about whether the laws we have affect them in negative ways and then seek to make changes. If our current laws are not tending to the needs of the people involved, then the laws must be analyzed and changed. Laws are meant to be passed to benefit those affected by the harsh realities faced by immigrants who flee their own countries.

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**Current Immigration Law**

As we have seen, it is extremely difficult to pass new laws with diametrically opposed viewpoints among our elected leaders: one focused primarily on enforcement of current law, and one asking questions of the efficacy of current laws and how they affect the well-being of immigrants themselves.

As followers of Jesus, I believe we are called to consider all political issues dealing with people's lives as *human issues first;* and that means we need to be listening to those affected, listening to the stories of our faith, and finding ways to advocate for just laws based on that foundation.

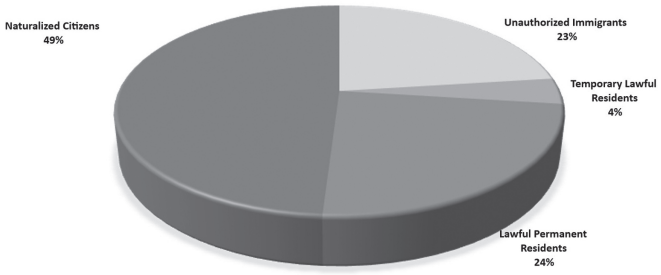
I have long held that as we explore issues of moral importance concerning real people, it is paramount that

we deal in storytelling (more on that later). We know, though, that stories are not the same as factual data. We still need facts and figures to give us insight and information about the situation.

We need to understand just how complicated U.S. immigration is – far more so than most of the talking heads on TV will ever understand. Our current legal system related to immigration is based on a law called the Immigration and Naturalization Act (INA), passed in 1965. Since then, a few follow-up laws have dealt with specific situations in immigration law, but none have fully reformed the original INA. Another law passed in 1986 called the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) provided amnesty to certain undocumented persons already in the U.S. but did not provide any pathway for new immigrants. This bill also had provisions to punish unscrupulous employers hiring undocumented immigrants, hoping to curb the demand for cheap foreign labor.

The last immigration law (still not comprehensive reform) passed by Congress was in 1996 and included many enforcement provisions. But it also ended up creating some rules that now bar someone's reentry for years (or forever) if immigrants have entered unlawfully (without inspection) and stay for certain periods of time. I won't get into the depths of this, but in some ways, our law created the large swaths of people without status by closing off pathways for them to come out of the shadows and get status lawfully, rejoining family or working in industries that rely on them.

Approximately 11 million undocumented immigrants live in our country, some of whom entered unlawfully and some of whom entered legally and overstayed their visa time period. Undocumented immigrants represent 23% of the foreign-born population in the United States. Most immigrants have legal status.[2]




Interestingly, 46% of undocumented immigrants had minor children as of 2010. By comparison, 38% of legal immigrants (including naturalized citizens) and 29% of U.S. native-born citizens had minor children. That's roughly 5.25 million children of undocumented immigrants in the U.S., roughly 850,000 also undocumented and 4.4 million native-born U.S. citizens.[3]

Undocumented immigrants are overwhelmingly Latino/a, with over 7.8 million of the 11 million undocumented coming from Latin America.[4] Of these, four million are of Mexican heritage.

The 2007 median income for undocumented immigrants was $36,000 per year, which is well below the mean of $50,000 per year for U.S.-born persons. According to the Pew Center's research, "a third of the children of unauthorized immigrants and a fifth of adult unauthorized immigrants lives in poverty. Undocumented immigrants are largely unqualified for government support, and only U.S. citizen children can legally obtain these benefits.[5]

With much bravado, the current administration embraces immigration as primarily one of the rule of law. The response from the administration is to seek to militarize the border, fund large detention centers, and focus their energies on enforcement without much effort toward legal solutions. Their aim to deport as many people as possible uses fear as intimidation to control migrant populations.

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Even those seeking to regularize their immigration status live in fear of being caught by Immigration & Customs Enforcement (ICE) as they attend mandatory check-ins or immigration interviews or immigration court proceedings. As you may have seen in the news, there's limited due process afforded to immigrants, even immigrants who have status, like foreign students studying at universities who, in disagreeing with the administration's policies, have found themselves suddenly without status.

Even as people sought legal status by embracing new policies—like temporary protected status (TPS), giving legal status to certain groups of people fleeing violent countries— positioned to bring them out of the shadows, that rug has now been ripped out from under most of them, with only a couple of weeks to leave the country to the places they have fled. They are provided a $1,000 check and told to "self-deport."

Immigrants have been taken off the streets by plainclothes and masked ICE agents and then denied access

to an attorney for many weeks, and making it difficult for their families to find them in the vast detention systems.

All the while, the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services is vastly underfunded and has backlogs so long that people who have filed petitions have to wait months, even years, for approval, meaning they could have had status a lot sooner had things been working properly. And of course, without bipartisan support, there's not going to be meaningful immigration reform through Congress.

What do we have available to us from Congress these days? The "One Big Beautiful Bill," this budget reconciliation bill, while not specifically an immigration reform bill, has within it some of the administration's focus on immigration enforcement. As you know, the president has tried (and, so far, failed) to undo the 14th amendment to birthright citizenship to children of immigrants.

In the meantime, then, those citizen children of undocumented immigrants have been targeted in the bill to ensure the parents do not receive the child tax credit for their citizen children.[6] (NOTE: These are taxpaying immigrants who use an ITIN, individual taxpayer identification number, to pay their taxes instead of a Social Security Number.) Taking away a credit for their citizen children is meant to hurt their families financially.

Seventy-five billion dollars has been earmarked for enforcement, including $45 billion for immigration jails for people without status – a noncriminal offense, mind you. If someone has no other offense than lack of status, they are not "criminals," but simply have a civil immigration offense. The bill also provides $1.3 billion to hire immigration judges and expand courtroom capacity to address backlogs and speed up the process to remove immigrants from the country.

Additionally, asylum-seekers will be charged $100 just to apply, most of them fleeing war-torn countries and who have nothing but the shirts on their backs and who have lost any money they did have to smugglers who helped them go across many borders to get somewhere safe. Then, while waiting for their asylum request to work through courts, they will have to pay $550 to apply for work authorization, and $275 for renewal of that authorization every six months to continue to work legally.[7] Remember, in a lot of states, they'll be making the federal minimum wage of $7.25/hour. It would take two five-day workweeks to even make enough money to pay the fee, and then they have to live on $580 (less taxes) for the month.

We could keep going with the ways in which this administration chooses to target foreigners within the U.S. who have no legal pathways to immigrate to the U.S. But the reality is that what we're hearing in the news isn't the whole story and, as Christians, dealing with immigrants must have more reflection than simply jumping on a bandwagon of anti-immigrant rhetoric and laws. [8]

**Christian Ethical Reflection on Immigration**

How do we deal with the fact that 11 million of our neighbors have no immigration status and live among us mostly in poverty? How do we love them? What does justice look like?

No matter how many figures we have, the information most needed is the "why." We need to know: Why are these people fleeing their countries of origin, where presumably they have family and deep roots? Why are they unable to obtain immigration status? Why did our laws get passed as they were?

Stories are the "face" of facts. We learn the human background of information to create space for the voices of those affected to be heard. There are many brave immigrants who have told their stories openly, sharing how these fearful moments of ICE arrests have upended their lives, even as many of them are in the process of regularizing their immigration status. Though Americans are being told these are all criminals, the reality is that less than half of detainees have any criminal record. Since June 14, 2025, 65% of people taken by ICE have no criminal convictions at all, and 93% had no violent convictions.[9] Stories of human beings attempting to find freedom in our country, many following our laws and trying to obtain immigration status, must be the focus of our interest in this subject.

*How do we deal with the fact that 11 million of our neighbors have no immigration status and live among us mostly in poverty? How do we love them? What does justice look like?*

And we are faithful to our religion in telling stories and, as church leaders, our call is to impart the scriptures to help us understand our faith, our God and our call to love others. Our scriptures are full of stories that teach us something about our moral lives. And specifically related to immigration, we have stories about immigrants to give us guidance.

In the Old Testament, we have many stories of humans who became migrants. From the very begin-

ning in Genesis, we learn that people are all made in the image of God (Gen. 1:1) and thus have worth, regardless of their lot in life. We remember the stories of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who both were migrants and hospitable (Gen. 11:31-12:9; Gen. 35:27; Gen. 28:4; Gen. 32:4). We also remember the story of Israel as sojourners in Egypt, living there after a famine drove them out of their homeland (Exod. 1).

We remember stories of immigrants coming into Israel—such as the Moabite Ruth, who accompanied Naomi after her Israelite husband died (Ruth 1-2; Note: Moabites were not universally liked – Num. 22-25; Deut. 23:3). And in Hebrew, we recognize various words for "foreigner" like the nouns *gēr* and *tôšab* and the adjectives *nokrî* and *zār.* The word *gēr* is the most used word for foreigner because, unlike the other terms, it means someone who has come to a place to stay (so think "immigrant" verses temporary visitor).

God gave instructions to the Israelites to care for the alien or immigrant among them because they were once aliens in Egypt (Lev. 19:33-34). God gave special instructions to care for the immigrant by allowing them to glean from the edges of the harvested fields (Lev. 19:9-10; Deut. 24:19-21), and asked Israel to provide funds to care for them (Deut. 14:28-29; 26:12).

Immigrants were in the same category with orphans and widows in the Old Testament –for whom special care was insisted (e.g., Deut. 10:18, 14:28-29, 16:11-14, 24:19-21, 26:12; Ps 146:9; Jer. 22:3; Zech. 7:10; Mal. 3:5).[10] And when Israel failed, prophets would be raised up to call them out for their lack of care for immigrants and other protected classes of people (Jer 23:3; Ezek 22:7, 29; Mal 3:5; c.f. Ps 94:6).[11]

Now, that doesn't mean the Old Testament doesn't have some tensions about foreigners. Every time Israel was surrounded by people following other gods, they were called to live differently. That often that meant doing away with foreigners in various ways (Deut. 7, 23; Ezra 9-10; Neh. 13). Remember, though, that it's only when Israel is in danger of assimilating into foreign practices while in exile that these issues arise. And, in fact, these passages are not dealing with immigrants (the *gerim*, or resident aliens) living in Israel at all.

If we are to look at the whole of the Old Testament, we see that when it comes to immigrants in their midst, God's laws were on the side of the immigrant more often than not. *The command to love the alien in their midst is the second most repeated commandment other than to worship only one God*.

This care for the last and the least permeates the messages from the prophets and Jesus' ministry in the New Testament as well. In the New Testament, there's less focus on the stranger directly since Jewish people were under Roman rule at the time; however, the witness of Jesus' ministry and teaching points toward an inclusivity of all nations we can't ignore. First, Jesus' own family fled persecution as Herod slaughtered Hebrew children (Matt. 2:13-23). Theologically, Jesus is seen as a "divine immigrant," leaving the glory of heaven to sojourn among us in humanity (Phil. 2:6-8).

Jesus called people to minister to the outsiders, such as the Samaritans, a hated group that believed differently and from whom the Jewish people were estranged. They weren't just outsiders, but enemies. And still, Jesus chose to engage these "foreigners" and outsiders and enemies as bearers of God's Kingdom in the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) and the Samaritan woman at the well who ran to tell the story to her village (John 4:4-42).

Jesus was also painted as a gracious host, including people of all backgrounds and situations – sharing meals with those the religious elite would ignore in order to share the message of God more widely (e.g.,

*The command to love the alien in their midst is the second most repeated commandment other than to worship only one God.*

Matt 9:9-11, 15:31-33, 21:30-32; 26:25-27; Mark 2:14-16; Luke 14, 19:1-10; John 6:4-6).[12]

The Early Church followed suit, offering gracious hospitality to all. The Greek *philoxenia*, (*phileo*, affection + *xenia*, stranger), translated "hospitality" in English, was meant for strangers.[13] They ate and shared things in common (Acts 2:44) and when tensions erupted between the rich and the poor, the insider and the outsider, they were called on in letters to offer equal respect (Acts 10-11; Gal 2:11-14; 1 Cor 11:17-34; Jas 2:1-13). Ethiopian eunuchs were baptized (Acts 8:26-40) and Jews and Greeks, slave and free, were all one in Christ (Gal. 3:28).

There are yet still tensions however about how to follow the law in the New Testament. For those who would interpret immigration through a legal lens, they might focus instead on passages like Romans 13 ("let every person be subject to governing authorities") or Matthew 22:15-22 (paying taxes to Ceasar), where followers of Jesus were instructed to follow the laws of the land.

These passages cannot be taken from their contexts,

however. In Matthew, Jesus calls people to live drastically differently from the world around them even as they pay their taxes, and in just a chapter before in Romans, Paul asks the believers to be shaped by God's love and not the pattern of this world. Also, let's be real: Paul's own teachings got him thrown in jail.

As we listen to these stories and hear God's message about strangers and foreigners, we do so keeping in mind the immigrants who live among us, who are made in God's image, whom we are called to love and protect and care for, as emphasized in scripture, and who have a story to tell us about God's mercy and love. Jesus himself said that when we see someone with no home, the person in prison, the strangers among us – we are seeing Jesus and should act accordingly.

**Living Our Immigration Ethic**

Applying our faith isn't a one-size-fits-all. Our stories in scripture aren't a 1:1 correlation to today's immigration laws in a democratic country. There may legitimately be differences of opinion as to how best we go about formulating immigration policy that protects and welcomes.

But we can apply what we know from our faith by living democratically together. We review our laws to see where they fall short of the justice we should offer people around us we are called to love. We with the privilege of citizenship (and especially those of us with white complexions) can listen more and speak less when issues of human importance are discussed, putting ourselves in someone else's shoes, trying to understand, rather than simply protecting our own interest.

Though this article cannot fit all our scriptural stories and the stories of modern-day immigrants, we are still called to know these stories and let them move us to compassion. I encourage pastors and church leaders to take seriously the real stories of immigrants and what they face in our current political climate and to apply their knowledge of our holy scriptures to inform how they advocate for the immigrant among us.

We need to stand in solidarity, to choose to minister locally, even when you minister in difficult circumstances. We might face opposition for our work. We need to support immigration reform, lobbying for bipartisan support where it's possible, overcoming the harmful rhetoric prevalent in politics today. *And we must say something*. Don't let the world rob whole groups of people of their cherished identity in God's image. As Proverbs 31:8 says, "Speak for those who cannot speak."

U.S. immigration is inextricably tied to our brothers and sisters in Christ all over the world. Just as we are called to share the love of Jesus locally and globally, so too is our love for immigrants a love for people wherever they are and wherever they come from. After all, the Great Commission is for *all nations* (Matt. 28:1-20). ■

*Rev. Dr. Libby M. Grammer is the senior minister of Lakeside Church in Rocky Mount, North Carolina. She is also the author of* Privilege, Risk, and Solidarity: Understanding Undocumented Immigration through Feminist Christian Ethics *(Wipf & Stock, 2017). Dr. Grammer has served churches in Virginia and North Carolina since 2015 and also served as an immigration legal assistant for 10 years. For more information, visit www.libbygrammer.com.*

*And we must say something. Don't let the world rob whole groups of people of their cherished identity in God's image. As Proverbs 31:8 says,"Speak for those who cannot speak."*

**George W. Bush:** *"Nearly all Americans have ancestors who braved the oceans – liberty-loving risk takers in search of an ideal… Immigration is not just a link to America's past; it's also a bridge to America's future."*

# It's [Past] Time to Risk

Ingrid C. A. Rasmussen

On June 3, 2025—just hours after I returned from a lovely vacation—I received a text message from my colleague, Pastor David Larson-Martínez, saying that armored vehicles and federal agents were stationed nearby at the corner of Lake Street and Bloomington Avenue—one of Minneapolis' most gorgeous, immigrant-rich intersections.

When I arrived at the scene, I was stunned by the overwhelming militarized federal presence. ICE, FBI, DHS, HSI and ATF were all present. Masked agents with assault rifles slung across their chests offered no information to those gathered on the street, treating concerned neighbors as potential threats rather than human beings deserving of basic dignity. Neighbors stood shoulder-to-shoulder, steadfast in their demand for answers.

In the days that followed, officials suggested that the raid was, in fact, not an immigration raid. They reported that a significant amount of illegal drugs were found at an affiliated site. They said that protesters gathered should have allowed authorities to do their work unimpeded—that it was unarmed civilians that made the situation unsafe. The message was clear: The community should have simply trusted the movements of federal authorities leading the enforcement operation and the county and city officers who were called in when the situation grew tense.

That call for blanket compliance does not acknowledge the moment in which we find ourselves living. Regardless of the circumstances of the raid, what we saw deployed on Lake Street—directly across the street from a daycare and a grocery store—was overscaled state violence against a Latine community that has already endured more than its share of trauma. State intimidation often masquerades as public safety measures. We are told that these military-style operations are necessary to protect civilians.

But we know better. That scene was not the Lake Street I know and love. It was a full-blown military operation—armored trucks, machine guns, chemical irritants and chaos unleashed in a neighborhood that deserves dignity—not domination. We can tell ourselves that men in masks, tactical gear and battlefield weapons storming local businesses in unmarked vehicles is normal. Or we can refuse that narrative. We can insist that our community deserves better. That our collective dream of safety and liberation is not only possible, but essential and demands more than what we see unfolding in communities across the country.

I am a farm kid who now serves in the beautiful heart of a city. I know what real safety looks like. It looks like small businesses that can thrive without fear of sudden raids. It looks like communities where people can call for help without worrying about deportation. It looks like school kids who can trust that their parents will be there to pick them up at the end of the day. It looks like neighbors—across lines of race, gender, class, documentation status or ability—who know each other's names.

The late theologian Howard Thurman said that "fellowship"—this connection across demographic divides—isn't just nice to have; instead, he asserted that it is the antidote to hatred. In his book *Jesus and the Disinherited,* he writes that "hatred often begins in a situation in which there is contact without fellowship, contact that is devoid of any of the primary overtures of warmth and fellow-feeling and genuineness."[1] Hatred, a root of injustice, grows when people are reduced to transactions.

*I am a farm kid who now serves in the beautiful heart of a city. I know what real safety looks like.*

Real safety is not created by masked men carrying machine guns. It is not built through the deployment of military vehicles on city streets or township roads. It is not achieved by creating a climate of suspicion. These tactics may create the illusion of security for some, but they make everyone less safe by fraying the social fabric that holds our communities together. To be clear, I am not opposed to community safety; I am simply opposed to the idea that, with alarming regularity, my neighbors and I are forced to come face-to-face with weapons of war and fear tactics dressed up as policy choices.

There is a better way—and it will necessitate all of us—particularly those with unearned privilege who could choose to self-protect—taking generous risks. Sharon Welch, a feminist theologian who writes about

the ethic of risk, reminds us that those who enter justice struggles do so from a place of incomplete understanding.[2] We cannot predict outcomes, but we are still called to act. Responsible action, as Welch frames it, means committing to care and act even without any promise of success, and resisting the temptation to despair when problems appear overwhelming. In this way, an ethic of risk grounds us in the courage to move forward without guarantees.

She also listened deeply to communities long oppressed, especially women of color. From their witness she learned that courage is sustained by at least three essential elements: a redefinition of responsible action—what once seemed reckless might in fact be the faithful thing; grounding in community—a community far larger than any single entity; and strategic risk-taking—daring to begin the work even before we know how it will all end. Resistance to systemic violence is never solitary but always communal: a shared journey that requires risk, humility and the conviction that transformation is possible even when we cannot yet see its fullness.

Along Lake Street, these truths take flesh each day: neighbors standing shoulder to shoulder in protest, congregations opening their doors in times of crisis, and community organizations weaving fragile threads of hope into a fabric strong enough to resist despair. At its best, the church I serve embodies this resilience—a community of resistance and resurrection, sustained by God's love and sent again and again into the world for the sake of justice, courage and liberation.

On June 3, my clergy friend Pastor Hierald Osorto reminded me that "even in the face of fear, there is power in community that flows from the very heart of God." I hear that pulse every day on Lake Street. And I trust that—even in our current suffering—God is leading us toward justice, not through domination or fear, but through the deep, courageous love we embody when we show up for one another. This is the heartbeat of the Christian life: to stay rooted in community, to lift up the stories born from our shared experiences, and to trust that God is already at work—moving us toward courage, connection and collective joy. This is what becomes possible when the church shows up—in love and imagination—to risk for the world God so deeply loves. ■

*Rev. Ingrid C. A. Rasmussen, ordained in 2013, serves as lead Pastor at Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in Minneapolis. A public theologian and community leader, she is deeply committed to justice and active engagement in the public square. Her writing has appeared in* The Christian Century*,* Faith & Leadership*,* Journal of Lutheran Ethics*, and she is a contributing author to* Parenting for a Better World *(Chalice Press, 2021).*

*At its best, the church I serve embodies this resilience—a community of resistance and resurrection, sustained by God's love and sent again and again into the world for the sake of justice, courage and liberation.*

# The Body of Christ, the Family of God and the Border: Christian Responses to the Immigration Crisis

By Alexia Salvatierra

Many Americans would say that the U.S. is in the middle of an immigration crisis. According to the Gallup poll of Fall 2024, 41% of American voters named immigration as an extremely important in their decisions about a candidate and 72% thought it was at least very important.

However, the definition of the crisis varies. Some agree with President Trump's 2015 statement:

> "When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. […] They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people" (*Time Magazine* 2015)[1].

That perspective views the immigration crisis as an invasion by dangerous criminals, exacerbated by a border that is out of control.

Those who are directly connected to immigrants may view the crisis somewhat differently. A farmer who depends on migrant labor may view the crisis as the lack of a sufficient number of visas for farm workers. A Silicon Valley entrepreneur might be concerned about the difficulty of obtaining H1 visas for high tech employees from India, or having to pay over $100,000 per year per H1 visa. Immigrants and the networks of those who care for them see the crisis in very different terms. For immigrants and their families, co-workers, fellow church members and friends, the system is also illogical, unjust and inhumane – particularly since the beginning of the second administration of President Trump.

**The Current Immigration Crisis:**

Since the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965[2], three preferences determine the majority of immigrants' admission to the United States; we call them blood (family relationships), sweat (employer petitions) and tears (forced migration fleeing persecution). While potential immigrants in all categories are currently experiencing a crisis, the "tears" category is a central target of current immigration policy.

Refugees are individuals who are legally determined to be fleeing persecution in their land of origin as a result of their race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group.[3] They are extensively vetted in order to meet this criteria and are granted status when they are outside the borders of the United States. Whether refugees are allowed to actually enter the U.S. is subsequently dependent on quotas and other policies, such as the current ban on refugees from specified countries.

Asylum-seekers, on the other hand, ask at the U.S. border to begin the vetting process. Asylum-seekers are usually legally present in the United States during the vetting process unless and until their petition is denied, although some have had to remain on the other side of the border and be vetted through online interviews. Temporary Protected Status is a category which grants temporary permission to stay in the US for people fleeing a country which has been determined by the federal government to be extremely dangerous to residents through armed conflict or natural disasters. When the temporary protected status ends, individuals who have been protected under that category can seek asylum.

*The number of people experiencing forced migration internationally in 2024 was 123.2 million, double the number of a decade ago.*

The number of people experiencing forced migration internationally in 2024 was 123.2 million, double the number of a decade ago. Roughly 60% are internally displaced and the rest are currently outside their country of origin.[4] The sheer amount of need is triggering territorial concerns and anti-immigrant sentiment around the globe, particularly in relatively prosperous destination countries (even though most global refugees stay in poorer countries closer to their country of origin).

In the U.S., according to Gallup, 55% of Americans wanted to reduce immigration around the time of the election in 2024. This reaction emerged as a direct response to the numbers of asylum-seekers arriving from the human rights crises in Venezuela, Haiti and Nicaragua.[5]

The Trump Administration has responded to this influx of asylum-seekers with a variety of draconian measures: ending funds for refugee support, closing the border to new asylum-seekers and ending temporary protected status for Haitians, Nicaraguans and Venezuelans as well as other humanitarian programs covering Afghanis and Ukranians. Perhaps most disturbing, there has been a concentrated push to forcibly detain asylum-seekers after their court hearings[6] – even in the absence of any negative judgement – and in some cases even before they have the chance to be heard in court. Detainees are routinely taken without any notice or information about their whereabouts given to their families. Some are taken to other countries that are infamous for human rights violations where they are placed in prisons that do not meet the minimum standard for care or protection.

While the administration claims that they are focusing their enforcement efforts on dangerous criminals, we know that there is little to no evidence for that claim. According to the Cato Institute, 65% of those detained by ICE in 2025 have committed no criminal offenses and 93% have not committed a violent crime. (The 35% that have a criminal offense includes all those with immigration-related offenses – e.g. they have previously been in deportation proceedings for the lack of legal status in the U.S.)[7]

In CECOT, the worst prison in El Salvador, a Venezuelan asylum-seeker who was a gay barber in Hollywood was sent to serve an indefinite sentence. The only evidence of his supposed criminal ties was a tattoo of a crown, which was interpreted as a gang tattoo by a government contractor with a complicated past, but it could have easily been a cultural tattoo[8]. The government of El Salvador receives $20,000 per inmate per year from the administration to incarcerate these deportees. Within the U.S., new detention centers are being built with names like "Alligator Alcatraz."

Ongoing raids in large urban centers and on commercial farms arrest and detain undocumented workers, many of whom have been in the country since the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994 caused the failure of the Mexican corn industry and the massive growth of U.S. agribusiness. These workers are currently heads of families, home owners, pillars of their community and building blocks of local economies. The hole left by their detention is causing serious economic hardship.

In the immigration sweeps, Latino/a U.S. citizens have also been arrested. Although they are later released, the experience is traumatic and leaves emotional scars. A video from the cell phone of a victim of arrest documents a moment when the young man tells the masked officers "You can't arrest me. I was born in this country." The immigration officer responds "You have no rights; you are an amigo." One officer says, "We are going to have to start shooting them soon." Another mentions a potential $50,000 bonus. This kind of treatment causes emotional and psychological scars. Citizen and immigrant children have been detained with their parents in adult detention centers.

To put flesh on the facts, M. is a young mother whose Nicaraguan husband's lawyer says has a strong asylum case. He went to court a little over two weeks ago, received an extension from the judge. He was promptly detained and taken away by ICE. M had been in the waiting room with her infant and preschool twins. A group of faith leaders who were praying outside the facility were able to provide immediate support to her, but she is devastated and struggling with how she and her family will survive. M could not find her husband for several days, and finally was able to locate him in a detention center out of state where she cannot visit him. On phone calls, he describes a lack of food and medical care as well as unsanitary and crowded facilities.

*In the U.S., according to Gallup, 55% of Americans wanted to reduce immigration around the time of the election in 2024. This reaction emerged as a direct response to the numbers of asylum-seekers arriving from the human rights crises in Venezuela, Haiti and Nicaragua.[5]*

The immigration crisis for immigrant networks means the violation of due process, cruel treatment and the anguish of affected families. How you understand and respond to the immigration crisis depends on who you are – on your individual and collective identity.

**A Theological Response: We are the Body of Christ and the Family of God:**

***The Body of Christ:***

> *Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body–whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free–and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many. Now if the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!" On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it* (1 Corinthians 12:12-27).

Our collective identity with all other believers is powerfully expressed by the metaphor of a body. This came home to me on a deeper level recently when I broke my ankle. The rest of my body was in pain as well. I could not ignore my ankle and either enjoy my life or carry out my work. The image of the body of Christ implies that we do the work of Christ together as a collective unit. If we have pain in our members that is unaddressed, we cannot be a healthy, coordinated body capable of doing his work.

The members of the Body of Christ have to relate to each other in a way that shifts traditional power relationships. In order for the full gifts of all to be recognized and used, we have to give particular emphasis and honor to the parts that have been less valued. This offers a critically important corrective to the sense of overwhelm that provokes the desire to close the circle. If the members of the body with the most need are bringing gifts worthy of particular honor, then serving their needs is not a zero sum game. We will receive as much or more than we give.

That can be hard for people with more power and resources to trust. However, this reversal of power was lived out in the early church in the story of the creation of the office of deacon in Acts 6. They were sharing their goods in common, and the widows of the Hellenists (immigrants to Israel) complained about being treated unequally in the daily distribution of food. The apostles, all Hebraists (born citizens of Israel) decided to create a committee to decide all food allocation.

They let the church decide whom to place on this powerful committee. The names of all of those chosen were Greek; they were Hellenists/immigrants. In general, a church led by the more privileged group might bring on a representative of the less privileged group to help make decisions, or at best to allow half of the group to be made up of those most affected. It would be almost unheard of to give all the decision-making power and authority to representatives of the less privileged and most affected group. (Gonzalez 2022, 595-598).[9] This is a dramatic example of how a community lives out its collective identity when it really believes that it is the Body of Christ as described in Corinthians.

*According the Pew Research Center, the majority of immigrants coming to the United States are Christians. We are one Body bonded by blood – the blood of Christ.*

According the Pew Research Center, the majority of immigrants coming to the United States are Christians. We are one Body bonded by blood – the blood of Christ. While this does not imply a specific immigration policy, it calls for a certain orientation and commitment. We simply cannot treat immigrants as if their suffering does not matter to us. We cannot continue to promote and support policies that cause immense and unnecessary suffering.

We also must seriously recognize that these less privileged members of the Body are to be given special honor. In Hebrews 13:2, we read that anyone who receives our hospitality may be an angel. The word

for angel in koine Greek does not only refer to celestial beings with wings. It simply means "messenger." The connotations in this verse are that a stranger may be a divine messenger, sent to bring you a word and a blessing. The implications are that we must see migrants through the lens of actual and potential contributors, making visible and proclaiming their contributions.

Through our common relationship with the God who migrated to this world in Jesus, who feeds us himself at the holy table, and who sends us out to continue his work, we now have a sacred relationship with each other. How should we treat a migrant who shares this sacred relationship with us? What is our duty when that person is rejected and mistreated?

Some might say that our duty to advocate for respect and recognition for migrants does not mean that we forget that an undocumented immigrant has broken the law and that a penalty is appropriate. A grace-filled perspective also implies that we do not overemphasize the faults of immigrants over their contributions, but rather seek for a penalty in the case of a legal offense that is not cruel but rather appropriate to the crime. Kristin Noemi, the current director of Homeland Security, said in a press conference concerning Kilmar Abrego Garcia, a Salvadoran immigrant accused (but not yet convicted) of transporting an undocumented individual across state lines, that she hopes "he would go to prison for the rest of his life for his crimes." Dr. Juan Martinez, the former academic dean of the Centro Latino and Fuller provost, once asked the question:

> "What is an appropriate punishment for someone who breaks into your home, feeds you dinner, cares for your children, cultivates your garden, paints your house and repairs your deck? Kicking them out of the country for life? Separating them from their citizen family members?"

To take seriously our common participation in the Body of Christ would require a radical re-examination of the attitudes and values of Christians whose uncritical support for the current administration has led them to look the other way when immigrants are unjustly vilified, attacked and punished.

Of course, immigrants are not all fellow believers. Is there another theological metaphor that can establish a collective identity between citizens and migrants?

**One Family under God:**

> 14 *For this reason I kneel before the Father,* 15 *from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name* (Ephesians 3:14-15).

Family is a serious responsibility in Latina cultures, similar to the cultures in which the scriptures were written. If a sibling that I do not like or get along with is in need, I am still judged by whether or not I provide assistance. We are all created by one heavenly parent and there is no possibility of disowning our common family. In Genesis 1, we see that we are made in the image of our Father in heaven and called to participate in his work of caring for creation. If anyone mistreats someone made in the image of God, they disrespect their Father whose image he bears.

In the book of Isaiah, in the midst of a list of exhortations to love mercy and do justice, we are called to care for our common kin,

> *"Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter – when you see the naked to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?"* (Isaiah 58:7)

When I read that verse, I think of a large extended family sitting down to dinner and being disturbed by a relative in need. The temptation is to call out, when the doorbell rings, "I am not home!" The passage in Isaiah, however, reminds us of a core belief in collective cultures. If my family is not well, I am not well. Verse 10b-13 promises that if you take care of your responsibilities to our common family, then you will *be "like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail."*

*Through our common relationship with the God who migrated to this world in Jesus, who feeds us himself at the holy table, and who sends us out to continue his work, we now have a sacred relationship with each other.*

I remember being in Tijuana, Mexico, with a group of church folks who had arrived to take care of the desperate needs of those who had arrived with the caravans from Central America. A Tijuana taxi driver took a few of us to the camps. On the way, he began to rail at the asylum- seekers who had come in the caravans. He said that they were both lazy and taking Mexican jobs (sounding just like some North Americans). He said that the ultimate insult was that they did not like Mexican food but preferred pizza (a typically Mexican concern). When I then asked him what he thought of the Marasalvatrucha, the massive organized crime syndicate that was preying on their communities, he said, "They are terrible, horrible." He then was silent for a moment and quietly added, "We do have to help them.

After all, they are human beings." Even in the midst of his outrage and territorial passions, he recognized his connection with the caravan members. After all, we are all human beings, created by the same divine Father of us all.

However, there are also streams of tradition in the scriptures that treat strangers differently, in reference to the degree of connection that exists. While we may all share a common Father, we experience different levels of family intimacy. There are different words in Hebrew for stranger that reflect the level to which that person participates in the people of God and to what extent he or she may represent a threat to the faith and well-being of the community. We see that Jesus also referred to a higher level of connection, not only with believers, but with anyone that does the will of God.

> *While Jesus was still talking to the crowd, his mother and brothers stood outside, wanting to speak to him. Someone told him, "Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you." He replied to him, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" Pointing to his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother"* (Matthew 12:46-50).

Still, being a threat or even a non-participant in the people of God does not take away the fundamental family relationship. I was part of a panel on immigration in a conservative megachurch in Seattle. During the question-and-answer time, a man stood up in the back, very angry, and asked, "What about Muslims? They are our enemies. They are here to hurt and kill us." Another distinguished member of the panel proceeded to explain why most Muslims are not our enemies. My response was different; I asked him what it meant to him to obey Jesus' command to love our enemies. He did not have a ready answer but it caused him to reflect.

The parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15 provides us with a wonderful example of this core principle. The younger son, by any definition, has mistreated his family. He has wasted the portion of their common assets that was his inheritance and now he is back again to share in the rest of the inheritance. The elder brother is rightfully upset, and accurately considers his brother a potential enemy. He leaves the party celebrating his younger brother's homecoming and his father comes outside to talk to him. He proceeds to lay out all the offenses that the younger brother has committed; in the process, he refers to him in speaking to their father as "this son of yours." His father's response does not deny or minimize the younger brother's offenses. Instead, he simply describes him as "your brother." All that he has done does not take away the essential relationship of family with all of its attendant connections and responsibilities.

The collective identity of family leads us to work for a society in which everyone matters, and in which everyone's welfare contributes to the well-being of the whole.

**Implications for Ministry:**

Primarily immigrant churches cannot escape the crisis that impacts their members. They are living with deep grief from multiple losses, outrage at injustice, and panic at the thought of more to come. (The "Big Beautiful Budget Bill" recently passed by Congress provides billions of dollars for additional immigration enforcement and also increases costs and penalties for immigrants trying to obtain or maintain legal status.) Pastors describe young people who have not left their homes for over a month except for work and school in order to stay close to their undocumented parents. Families are running out of food. New regulations allow for ICE to scan emergency Medicaid files for the addresses of people without social security numbers, keeping families from taking care of serious health concerns. Children, youth, parents, whole congregations and pastors are exhibiting all the symptoms of trauma, which weakens their capacity for effective and faithful response.

*Primarily immigrant churches cannot escape the crisis that impacts their members. They are living with deep grief from multiple losses, outrage at injustice, and panic at the thought of more to come.*

Primarily resident and citizen churches fall into two camps; those who agree with the president's animus toward immigrants and who are passively scorning or actively persecuting immigrants, and those who want to help. Those who want to help often do not know what to do.

Both immigrant church leaders and residents who want to help are frightened. The administration is targeting dissenters in a variety of ways and cautious institutions are changing core policies. The Assemblies of God have stopped recognizing the ordination of undocumented immigrant pastors. Organizations that

help immigrants have received threatening letters about their tax status. Citizens have also been arrested for protesting kidnappings and face felony charges. ICE agents and imposters roam the streets dressed in black, with black masks and no badges, carrying rifles. There have been reports of assault and abuse. In Los Angeles, they have been accompanied by the Marines and the National Guard, in one incident in a park with helicopters and heavy-duty military equipment.

However, as has been true around the world and throughout history, many churches, standing in the tradition of the cities of refuge described in Numbers 35, and in the sacrificial love of Christ are doing their best to protect, support, inspire, encourage and mobilize.

In Numbers 35, six towns are given to the Levites to be cities of refuge. The cities of refuge are a place for a person who has committed manslaughter to flee so that they will not be killed by an avenger, who would normally have the right to take their life in exchange for the life of the victim. The principle underlying the Cities of Refuge is the right to a fair punishment. An offender who kills accidentally should not suffer the same punishment as one who kills intentionally. The Levites, the tribe of priests, are those with the responsibility to offer this protection. In the centuries since Numbers 35 was written, this principle has been carried forward in multiple sanctuary movements – times when there has been a societal trend of unfair punishment and churches have stepped in to provide protection, elevating divine law above human law. Those offering sanctuary have often risked becoming a victim as well of the same unjust punishment (as in the Christians who sheltered escaping Jews during the Holocaust or escaping Africans under slavery). The Christians who have taken this risk have identified with the sacrificial love of Christ and have entered into danger willingly, offering a vibrant and compelling testimony in the process.

Actions that churches are taking at this time also represent a risk, although the extent of the risk is still unclear and may vary by geographic location. Wherever there is a willing acceptance of danger in the name of the love of Christ, the ensuing testimony is powerful, and may counteract the negative witness of churches who are compromising their values and beliefs to support a political party. At Centro Latino, we have been partnering with various national networks to offer regular webinars to immigrant pastors and leaders that provide both important information and an opportunity for exchanging best practices. The following practices come out of these conversations and other creative ideas that are being acted on around the country.

*The following practices come out of these conversations and other creative ideas that are being acted on around the country.*

**Protection:**

- Trustworthy Legal Assistance: Desperate people are vulnerable to scams, and a church taking the time and energy to identify lawyers with integrity is an important ministry.
- Patrols and Court Watch: ICE kidnapping can sometimes by stopped by a circle of faith leaders surrounding an asylum applicant after they leave the courtroom.
- Educate immigrant networks about strategies for staying as safe as possible.

**Support:**

- Immigrants and family members frightened to leave their homes need basic assistance – food, clothing, rides to medical help, to work or to get children to school.
- Trauma-informed care – therapy for members and training for pastors to provide basic tools to reduce the negative impact of trauma are both valuable.
- Overnight children's camps can get children out of the house without parents having to bring them to daily camp.
- Pastoral leaders can sometimes get into detention centers to visit, minister and provide information, even when lawyers cannot.
- Partnerships between immigrant and resident churches can increase the resources available to immigrants and deepen the commitment of residents and citizens.

**Inspiration and Encouragement through Mobilization:**

- Hope strengthens. Pastor-led public vigils, demonstrations, and actions encourage us all. Collaborative efforts across sectors makes winning more possible.
- Educating members about the immigration system and the Biblical bases for holistic mission and activism is desperately needed in order to build the base of active participants
- Latina evangelical Pentecostal churches have opportunities to reach people who would never hear the broader story. Vigils such as the Mothers and Godmothers of the Disappeared, which

focuses on publically praying outside the court and detention facility for detainees, their families and law enforcement, offer a counter-narrative to burning cars and criminal photos.
- Legislative visits to build relationship can spark courage in legislative leaders who are inspired by the courage of faith leaders on the ground. Intentionally reaching out to key church leaders can help expand the movement through engaging their networks.
- International solidarity can sustain inspiration for the long haul.

**Conclusion:**

In our highly individualist society, we often think of identity in individual terms. However, the biblical perspective is that we are made for relationship and formed in relationship. Our collective identities influence our perspective and behavior. The immigration crisis in the U.S. is viewed very differently by those whose collective identity is immigrant or includes immigrants vs. a collective identity which sees immigrants as a threatening other.

The biblical metaphors of Body of Christ and Family of God give Christians a collective identity that automatically include immigrants as valuable members of the collective whole and call us to work for their well-being. At this moment in history, the ministry actions that flow from this perspective include acts of protection, support, inspiration, encouragement and mobilizing for advocacy. When we engage in these acts, we serve the Lord who told us that whatever we do to the stranger, we do to him (Matthew 25:25). ■

*Rev. Dr. Alexia Salvatierra is a Lutheran pastor, scholar, and activist with over 40 years of experience in congregational ministry, community organizing, and legislative advocacy. She serves as the Academic Dean for the Center for the Study of Hispanic Church and Community and Associate Professor of Mission and Global Transformation at Fuller Theological Seminary. A leading voice in faith-rooted organizing, she has co-authored Faith-Rooted Organizing, Buried Seeds, and God's Resistance, equipping Christian leaders to mobilize for justice. A national leader in immigration and economic justice, Dr. Salvatierra co-founded the Evangelical Immigration Table, the New Sanctuary Movement, and Matthew 25/Mateo 25, advocating for immigrant rights and marginalized communities.*

The story of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. pastor and theologian, is the story of a man who spoke as a prophet to a German church that was more concerned with her own security than she was with doing the work of God in the midst of oppression and human need… One of his most important contributions to theology and to our understanding of contemporary discipleship came as a result of his experiences as a prisoner of the Gestapo from April 1943, until his execution by hanging on April 9, 1945… he learned what it meant to view life, history, and scripture from what he termed "the view from below, from the perspective of the outcasts, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the reviled. In short, from the perspective of those who suffer."

—from *What Would Bonhoeffer Say?* by Al Staggs

# Love Thy Neighbor: Christian Ethics and Immigration Advocacy at the Border

Rev. Manuel Retamoza

*Content warning: descriptions of the tragic death of children and other violence against immigrant people*

In September 2015, front-page images of a young toddler lying facedown on a beach captured the world's attention. We witnessed global outcries and deep sadness as the story emerged about Alan Kurdi, a Syrian toddler who drowned while trying to escape violence in his home country. He and his family fell from an overcrowded boat while heading to Greece.[1]

In the same month, local immigration justice advocates in San Diego learned about a tragic incident involving a young mother and her three small children. After crossing the international border, they were abandoned by a "coyote" in the sweltering heat of the California desert of Imperial County. Tragically, the mother died in the hostile desert conditions, surrounded by her three children who survived the ordeal. No news outlets covered her death, and her name and identity remain unknown to the public. According to trusted sources, one of her children was named Jesús.

As I write this, it has been almost exactly 10 years since both of these horrific events occurred. However, public discourse on immigration has only become more hostile and divisive. Immigrants are often dehumanized and treated as political pawns, resulting in immeasurable suffering and loss of life. As the number of immigrants has increased, the response from news outlets, our society, and the Christian Church in the United States has only contributed to the harm caused.

Amid this tension, our Christian call is to proclaim Christ crucified and risen, and a faith that is rooted in the love of God and our neighbors. Our Christian teachings on love, justice and mercy urge us to respond with humanity and compassion to the immigration crisis in the United States and worldwide. The scriptures, which are often used by leaders to divide our society, clearly instruct us on how to treat, honor and advocate for immigrants and refugees.

Biblical mandates form the foundation of the broader Christian faith and guide us as people of faith and children of God to serve our neighbors. In Matthew 25:31-46, a passage often titled "The Judgment of Nations," Jesus instructs us to clothe the naked, feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, and welcome the stranger. It is a response that is both simple and profound to God's call to us as Christians, with warnings of what will come if we ignore these mandates.

In the book of Leviticus and various other passages in the Old Testament, we find important teachings that offer essential guidance that call for compassion:

> *"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 native-born 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, NRSVue).

This message is not new; it is an ancient call to all who claim the Bible as the word of God and the cradle of our faith. So, it is clear the concept of "neighbor" in the biblical context carries significant implications for immigration policy.

*In Matthew 25:31-46, a passage often titled "The Judgment of Nations," Jesus instructs us to clothe the naked, feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, and welcome the stranger.*

As people of faith, how can we balance the teachings of scripture with the reality that many of our immigrant neighbors already in the U.S. are facing discrimination and being targeted by masked individuals armed with weapons, all under the pretext of "public safety?"

Recently, my co-pastor at St. Andrew's Lutheran Church and I were asked to accompany a friend from our congregation to immigration court after he received a notice to appear. We invited another pastoral colleague and our synod bishop to join us and wear our clerical collars as a visual symbol. At every step of our journey into and out of the courthouse, we were thanked for being present and asked to come back. We were told by lawyers and volunteer court observers that when faith leaders are present at the courthouse, there seem to be fewer people detained by ICE agents

in the halls outside the immigration court hearings. In order to enter the courtroom, we had to walk through what felt like a sea of masked and weaponized ICE agents in cargo pants. Two of the pastors in our group started to accompany people out of the courtroom and to the elevators, standing by them as they were stopped and questioned, tension lingering in the air.

While I anticipated that we would be confronted with the fear and intimidation techniques being employed by ICE agents against those entering and exiting the immigration court, what I didn't anticipate was how triggering their presence would be for me personally. As a first-generation Mexican American who has crossed the border regularly for my entire life, I have long been aware that the foundation of our immigration system assumes that immigrants are guilty until proven innocent. Instead of acknowledging the humanity of immigrants and asylum seekers, the rhetoric is to call people "illegals," as if legality equates to morality. Instead of receiving the stories of people, most of whom endure physical and emotional trauma before they even arrive at the border, with empathy and compassion, we "other" them and treat them like criminals. These practices are not new. My own family carries the stories of the difficulties they endured in order to establish a new life here in the United States.

My own awareness of this injustice has long drawn me to spend time at the border, to provide immersion tours and classes discussing the complex dynamics of immigration and faith, and specifically to return again and again to an area at the border wall between San Diego and Tijuana called Friendship Park. Inaugurated in 1971 by Pat Nixon, Friendship Park was meant to be a symbol of friendship between the U.S. and our neighbor, Mexico. Mrs. Nixon was heard to say that day at the park, "I hope there won't be a fence too long here." She then asked that the wire be cut so she could walk into Mexico and greet people. Although not mentioned in any articles, she may have also wanted to visit a taco stand to get some TJ Playas tacos.

Friendship Park is also the home of Border Church, an international worshiping community, established informally by Rev. John Fanestil in the early 2000s. Fanestil, a United Methodist pastor, began this ministry by bringing communion and sharing it through the border fence with people on the other side, a symbol of the transcendence of God's love and grace. Soon, that simple act of occasionally sharing communion through the wall on Sunday afternoons developed into a consistent practice for Fanestil and others, eventually leading to a weekly communion service on both sides of the wall, known as Border Church.

Border Church is now an established worshiping community separated by an international boundary. It is currently divided by two 30-foot walls with a detainment space in between, which I call "No Man's Land," and the interior walls are covered in razor wire. In the beginning at Friendship Park, people, including myself, were able to touch and greet one another through a chain-link fence. We truly worshiped together as one congregation, hearing the word preached, singing songs, praying together, sharing communion across the border, and creating a full circle, divided only by a fence for blessings and to break bread together. After years of communing with Border Church when I could, and then partnering with Border Church leadership to assist and support their work along the border, I was called to take on the mantle of Border Church pastor in June of 2025.

Border Church, rooted in our Christian identity, has passionately championed immigrant rights and supported deported individuals for many years. Since the wall construction in 2009, the mission has become even more focused, as we welcomed an increasing number of deported individuals and asylum seekers among our Sunday afternoon parishioners. In the spirit of fostering community, we draw upon the insights found in Paul's epistle to the church in Thessalonica, specifically Chapter 5, where he advocates for the provision of unwavering support to one another:

*Fanestil, a United Methodist pastor, began this ministry by bringing communion and sharing it through the border fence with people on the other side, a symbol of the transcendence of God's love and grace.*

> *But we appeal to you, brothers and sisters, to respect those who labour among you, and have charge of you in the Lord and admonish you; esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. And we urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what*

*is good; abstain from every form of evil* (1 Thess 5:12-21, NRSVue).

Through collaborative efforts, we are able to lift up individuals and cultivate a nurturing environment for all those seeking solace and hope.

Over the years, Border Church on the U.S. side has been forced to move its place of worship because of the ongoing construction work on the wall and the flooding of the Tijuana River Valley (U.S. side). Until just a few weeks ago, we most often worshiped outside what Customs and Border Patrol named Whiskey 8 (West 8 gate of the secondary wall), about three miles east of Playas, the Tijuana site of Border Church. For the last few years, Border Church has worshiped on the newly-taken federal land, with only the secondary wall being the border itself. This congregation is migratory, as it continues to serve migrants in both the United States and Mexico.

On the U.S. side at Whiskey 8, from 2023-24, those gathered shared in the Eucharistic meal and provided food and necessities to those being detained between the walls under the ever-present eyes of the Customs and Border Police. The church and other non-profits offered items for those detained, including foil blankets, basic foods (ramen, bars, fruit, water, coffee and tea). During this time, many of the migrants asked for prayers for safety and blessings. We heard many languages spoken among families from all over the globe, as well as a few indigenous languages of Mexico and Central America. On the Baja side at La Playas, they have continued to worship in the same space throughout the construction and added a "love feast," a lunch provided by one of the shelters in Playas de Tijuana, Casa La Luz.

The Border Church is dedicated to a work and ministry that echoes the early Christian church in the centuries following the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Our mission is to respond to the call to resist oppressive systems, fear of the other, and to promote unity instead of division through sacramental worship. It was not fear that motivated the early followers of The Way. Rather, they were driven by a spirit of service and a willingness to share what they had with others.

Today, churches across the United States, along with the larger church community and various Lutheran advocacy organizations, including Global Refuge, ELCA AMMPARO Migrant Ministry, and Lutheran World Relief, stand up for the rights of the poor, marginalized and migrants. We can all advocate for policy changes that combat the divisions created by oppressive systems that separate God's people based on skin color and ethnicity. We strive to confront racism and exploitation wherever they exist.

How would our world and country change if the church and its members began to see everyone as friends, neighbors and children of God? By avoiding terms like "illegal" or "alien" and instead recognizing each other as siblings in Christ, we could restore the humanity of those we label and reclaim the humanity of those who use such terms. We could name the collective grief we feel when sin and brokenness result in the unnecessary suffering and deaths of people who have been forced to leave their homelands.■

*It was not fear that motivated the early followers of The Way. Rather, they were driven by a spirit of service and a willingness to share what they had with others.*

*Pastor Manuel Retamoza (MDiv. Luther Seminary '04) is co-pastor at St. Andrew's Lutheran Church and astor at the Border Church in San Diego, California. Manuel holds leadership roles in the ELCA Youth Ministry Network, the American Indian and Alaskan Native Association, and the ELCA Doctrine of Discovery task force, and is a Wisdom Keeper for Indigenous Leadership Education (PLTS).*

**Regarding Footnotes and References**

To accommodate all articles, we have omitted footnotes and references from the printed journal. However, readers can find the article's document, including footnotes, on our website at **www.christianethicstoday.com**

# The Real Scapegoats, According to Matthew and Girard

Jennifer Garcia Bashaw

Scapegoating claims and accusations have ricocheted throughout the public square in recent months, diluting the meaning and power of the term. On one side, political figures decry the media's scapegoating of them and dominant religious groups complain about being society's scapegoats. On the other side, activists and investigative journalists argue that our country's policies and practices make immigrants, migrant workers and asylum-seekers into scapegoats. So, who are the real scapegoats? And how do we recognize and work against the most dire practices of scapegoating in our country today?

The work René Girard, a French scholar who developed scapegoat theory over his years studying religion and literature, can help us differentiate between the scapegoats and the scapegoaters.[1] In his research, Girard found that scapegoating is a practice in which almost all societies since ancient times have participated. It is a hidden, even unconscious ritual that focuses the violence of a society onto a singular victim, either an individual or a group. When a community accuses that victim, turns against them and eventually kills or expels them, it brings peace. More often than not, scapegoats are innocent of the crimes of which they are accused, but the community does not realize it. They believe the guilt of the scapegoat because to accept the victim's innocence would make them face the evil and violence in their own hearts, at the heart even of human society.

**The Characteristics of Scapegoats**

According to Girard, one of the most foundational truths about scapegoating is that the people with power—those in the center of society—are the ones who initiate and perpetuate scapegoating. The scapegoats that insiders choose tend to be similar enough to the members of a society that they can bear its pollution but dissimilar enough to be singled out for blame. The scapegoat must be seen as removed from society by some characteristic or circumstance. Scapegoats, then, tend to be chosen from those who are outsiders, marginalized or have physical differences that cause them to stand apart from the majority. They also tend to be people without family or allies, in order to preclude retaliation from someone on their behalf. These scapegoats are accused of crimes that a society abhors, often taboos, but are themselves usually innocent of these crimes.

Girard's description of those who have served as innocent victims throughout human history strikes a chord of familiarity for us today as we see our own government focus its inflammatory rhetoric and unjust policies on immigrants, those labeled as the ultimate "outsiders." Instead of admitting the sins of greed, materialism and selfishness at the heart of our culture and politics, the current powers are deflecting blame onto migrants and refugees, accusing them of stealing jobs, tanking the economy, and committing shocking crimes. Tragically, the scapegoating has moved beyond rhetoric and dehumanizing blame and has resulted in the detaining, physical suffering, and death of immigrants in our country. The United States is sacrificing their scapegoats and some will not survive the ritual.

*Tragically, the scapegoating has moved beyond rhetoric and dehumanizing blame and has resulted in the detaining, physical suffering, and death of immigrants in our country.*

**The Christian Scriptures and Scapegoating**

Ironically, the scapegoating violence in American society today comes largely at the hands of political powers who claim to be Christians. This is ironic because Girard's work shows us that the solution to scapegoating can be found in biblical literature. As Girard was studying ancient myths to uncover premodern processes of scapegoating, he read the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. What he found in the scriptures of the Jewish and Christian religions became the revelatory cipher to his theory.

In the Bible, as in other cultures' myths, humans project their own violence onto the divine and fail to grasp that it originated with them. However, Girard sees the Bible as a text in transition between myth and gospel, one that reveals the system of scapegoating through many of its stories and teachings. Whereas myths usually hide the scapegoat mechanism by tell-

ing stories from the perspective of the persecutors, the biblical stories regularly speak from the perspective of the victim. In the stories of the Hebrew Bible, we hear Abel's innocent blood cry out from the ground, we see Joseph prevail and forgive despite the unjust blame forced upon him, and we experience Hagar's abuse and expulsion along with her naming of God. Hebrew prophetic literature also takes the side of the victim when it rebukes Israel for their abuse of the poor and exhorts them toward justice for the oppressed (as exemplified in Amos and Micah). The prophets set forth a vision of God's forgiveness that is not tied to law or the sacrificial system but is part of God's love for God's people.

According to Girard, this storytelling from the underside crescendos in the New Testament when the Gospel writers narrate the story of a messiah who identifies with society's victims and calls out the power structures that perpetuate violence. Jesus dies at the hands of those powers and the Gospels reveal him not as a victim of God, but as an innocent victim of a violent humanity. The Gospels' presentation of Jesus's life and death portrays elements of the scapegoating mechanism that religious mythology usually masked. When they reveal Jesus as an innocent scapegoat in a long line of innocent scapegoats, the single victim mechanism loses its efficacy. A knowingly innocent scapegoat takes the focus off the victim and onto the systems that perpetuate the scapegoating. Jesus's story unveils the violence and scapegoating at the hearts of societies and that, according to Girard, is what makes him the scapegoat to end all scapegoats.

Needless to say, Jesus was not the last scapegoat in history. Although the Gospel writers gave Christians the truth about Jesus and scapegoating, the message did not stay at the heart of Christianity for long. As the leaders of the Church became the powers in society, they became the scapegoaters themselves. While there have always been strands of Christianity who stood up for the outsiders and the oppressed, the dominant expressions of the Church throughout history have discounted the anti-scapegoating playbook in the pages of their Scripture. One reason Christians have tended to overlook this antidote is because we do not center the message of the Gospels in our practices and even more foundationally, we do not read the Gospels well. If we did, we would recognize that the whole of Jesus' story is a guide to welcoming the outsiders, not scapegoating them. From the very first pages of the canonical Gospels, there are literary breadcrumbs that lead us to the overarching mandate to welcome and value the outsider rather than following the powers that dehumanize outsiders and make them scapegoats.

**Matthew's Infancy Narrative: Where Outsider Becomes Insider**

A careful interpretation of Matthew's first chapters demonstrates that the birth narrative of Jesus sets the stage for the anti-scapegoating message of Jesus's life and death. The Gospel opens with a purposefully structured outline of Jesus' family tree. Although contemporary readers often skip over the genealogy, thinking the "so-and-so-begat-so-and-so" to be mundane and repetitive, the opposite is true. If one knows what to look for, there are multiple layers of meaning waiting to be discovered in the genealogical lists.

The first layer involves the arrangement of the stanzas. Matthew is not exhaustive in his genealogy; he strategically selects which ancestors he mentions. One clue as to why he limits the list can be found at the end of the genealogy in 1:17: "So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations." When biblical authors use repetition, readers should be alert. Matthew arranges the descendants into sets of fourteen because it establishes Jesus's connection to King David—fourteen is the value of David's name in Hebrew numerology. Dalet, or D, is the fourth letter in the alphabet, vav, or "V" is the sixth and because the letters in Hebrew also serve as numbers, the numerical value of David's name is 14 (D, V, D or 4 + 6 + 4). This may sound like Bible Code mumbo jumbo, but it was common for Jews to refer to the numerical value of names and Matthew's original hearers would have understood his implication. Forging a strong connection between David and Jesus in the genealogy emphatically confirms that Jesus hails from foretold lineage of the Messiah.

*As the leaders of the Church became the powers in society, they became the scapegoaters themselves.*

David is not the only historical link Matthew attaches to Jesus in his tri-partite division. When Matthew marks off the stanzas, he uses three different points of reference: Abraham, David and the deportation to Babylon. Here, Matthew is bracketing off the Davidic period (a time of stability and prosperity for the Jewish people) with two time periods during which Israel dwelled in a land that was not their own. During the time of Abraham, an obedient migrant sent

by God sojourned in a foreign land. In the Babylonian deportation, a disobedient people exiled by God also sojourned in a foreign land. Matthew's bookended division here is a reminder that Jesus may have come as the Davidic messiah and king, but his kingdom would be one more suitable for the exiled and the immigrant than the privileged and prosperous.

In addition to structuring the genealogy with purpose, Matthew strategically includes people among Jesus' ancestors who would raise a few eyebrows. It is certainly unusual that Matthew includes women in his genealogy. Such lists in the Hebrew Scriptures usually traced generations through the males, father to son. But that is not the only irregularity. With the exception of Mary, all the women in Matthew's genealogy are non-Israelites, people considered foreigners and outsiders in their contexts. Tamar was a Canaanite woman who married two of Judah's sons and, after being widowed by both of those wicked men, had to use her cunning to fight for the family rights denied to her by Judah (see Genesis 38). Rahab was the prostitute from Jericho who hid the Israelite spies, made a deal with them to save her and her family, and eventually became a part of the fledgling people of Israel (see Joshua chaps. 2 and 6 for this outsider to insider story). Ruth was a woman from Moab—Israel's sworn enemy, who won the heart of Boaz for being bold, loyal and hard-working (see Ruth). The wife of Uriah, otherwise known as Bathsheba, was part of a Hittite community in Jerusalem and, with a name that means "daughter of Sheba," she was likely an immigrant from Arabia (see 2 Samuel 11).

It is no accident that Matthew breaks with convention to include four foreign women in his finely hewn introduction. He was adding further scaffolding to the idea that Jesus did not come only from Jewish stock, but from a heritage that blended Gentile and Jewish, male and female legacies. The outsider women Matthew spotlights in his genealogy foreshadow what the rest of the Gospel would confirm: Jesus had come to save not just Israel, but all nations, and anyone who wanted to enter his kingdom would need to embrace diversity in the same way Jesus did.

As we move from Matthew's genealogy into the birth narrative proper, references to foreign inclusion only multiply. In Matthew 2, we read of the wise men who traveled from afar. No other Gospel mentions these foreign visitors, but Matthew gives them a vital role to play in his infancy narrative. They alone seem aware of the momentous event taking place in Judea, and they are the first ones in Matthew to worship Jesus, the baby born king of the Jews.

For the first readers of Matthew's Gospel, the appearance of astrologists from the East must have been jarring. What does it mean that three foreign pilgrims anticipated the Messiah being born in Judea, that they paid homage to him while he was still a toddler? For Matthew, it meant everything. When he is writing his Gospel, sometime between 70 and 90 CE, nascent Christianity was already on its way to becoming a multi-cultural, multi-national world movement. His inclusion of these early followers of Jesus demonstrated that from the very prelude of the Jesus movement, God had welcomed the wisdom and contributions of people from around the globe. Matthew's recognition of these contributions must have spoken volumes to early Christians who struggled with the practical challenges of their diverse body of believers.

Intertwined with the epic journey of the Magi is tale of another cross-country trek: the holy family's exodus to Egypt. In Matthew 2, the Magi met with the current king of the Jews, Herod the Great, to inquire about a baby who had been born the future king of the Jews. Little did they know, Herod was a jealous, murderous ruler who would not hesitate to eliminate any threat to his throne (he had even killed some of his own children to protect his crown). The Magi followed their instructions—and the star—to worship the child but were warned in a dream to not return to Herod. Meanwhile, Joseph also received a warning in a dream:

> *Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son.* (Matt 2:13-15, NRSVue)

*He was adding further scaffolding to the idea that Jesus did not come only from Jewish stock, but from a heritage that blended Gentile and Jewish, male and female legacies.*

Throughout Scripture, we see God speaking to people through various means—sometimes in visions or through voices, sometimes through angels or through

burning bushes. Here, an angel appears to Joseph in a dream and tells him to leave Bethlehem and journey to another land—all to keep Jesus and his family safe. It is a horrifying situation—a powerful government leader threatening the life of a child and his family. Yet when we tell the Christmas story every year, we somehow gloss over the terror of this part of the narrative. We don't speak about how frightened and uncertain Mary and Joseph must have felt, or how difficult it would have been for them to uproot themselves from the only country they had ever known and venture to a far-off place where they knew no one. But Matthew wants us to empathize with the family and their situation, to contemplate what it would be like to make such a disturbing decision. Is it better to leave and risk everything or stay and gamble with the safety of their toddler? No parent should ever have to make that decision, not in first-century Judea and not in 21st century America.

But, as Matthew tells us, the young family did have to make the decision, and they chose to flee Israel as refugees. Matthew ends this part of the passage with one of his fulfillment quotations: "This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I have called my son.'" Here, Matthew explicitly connects God's work in the exodus to what is happening in the lives of Mary and Joseph. Just as God rescued God's people from the tyranny of Pharaoh then, God is rescuing Jesus and his family from the tyranny of Herod. But Matthew does not end his allusions there; he fills out the details of the story with yet another biblical reference:

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

> "A voice was heard in Ramah,
> *wailing and loud lamentation,*
> *Rachel weeping for her children;*
> *she refused to be consoled, because*
> *they are no more."* (Matt 2:16-18, NRSV)

Matthew could have focused the story a bit longer on the miracle of Jesus's birth. He could have told us about how Jesus grew up as a child in Nazareth. But instead, he writes about a paranoid despot who unleashed a slaughter on innocent children. He pauses the story of Jesus' childhood to tell us about children who never got to grow up. Because of this break in the story, we must pay extra attention to Matthew's reasons for including this narrative. His initial description is short and to the point, "he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under," but in verse 18, Matthew takes a longer moment to reflect on the significance of these slaughtered toddlers. There, Matthew quotes once again from a Hebrew prophet: *"A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more."*

Even those who don't know the reference to Rachel and Ramah should be moved by this chord of grief—it speaks about losing a child and it describes the kind of raw mourning and heartbrokenness that defies comfort. But for the Christians who would have read Matthew's Gospel in the early Church, these words would have been even more heart-rending and layered with meaning. They would know what Ramah represented. They would have remembered that near that place was where their mother in the faith, Rachel, died in childbirth. They would also know that Matthew was quoting from the prophet Jeremiah in this verse. When Jeremiah first utters these words referring to Rachel's children, it is in the final years of Judah's monarchy, in the 6th century BCE. For Jeremiah, the phrase "Rachel weeping for her children" does not refer to her literal children Joseph and Benjamin, but her descendants, the Hebrew people who remained in the southern kingdom of Judah. In Jeremiah's time, Rachel is mourning for the people of Jerusalem as they are led away into Babylonian exile, marching away from Ramah, the same place where Rachel died generations before.

*But Matthew wants us to empathize with the family and their situation, to contemplate what it would be like to make such a disturbing decision. Is it better to leave and risk everything or stay and gamble with the safety of their toddler?*

This reference further strengthens the case Matthew is making for the sojourning nature of the people of God. He is telling a story within a story. The first story is one about a would-be king born in Bethlehem who flees from the tyrannical power trying to destroy him. The second story is much larger, and it circles through time. It is the story of Israel and YHWH, but it is also

the story of humanity and God. It is a story about an enslaved, wandering people whom God rescued from a tyrannical power. Why does Matthew include the horrifying tale of Herod and the fleeing family in his infancy narrative? Because it illustrates the kind of world that Jesus was entering alongside the kind of world he came to create. It shows us that Jesus sojourned among us so he could flip the script on our earthly kingdoms. Our world may be a place where corrupt rulers have the power to cause great suffering, where families must flee their homeland to survive, where innocent children suffer and die on a daily basis. But Jesus came to initiate an upside-down kingdom, where outsiders are insiders, and where the refugees and sojourners are the heroes of the story.

It is the continuation of Israel's story, but it is a new story as well. Matthew wants his audience to know that Jesus had come to lead Israel out of their oppression, like Moses led the people out of Egypt, but he wanted to communicate even more than that. Jesus had also come to counteract the corruption in humanity, the practices and priorities that put people like Herod in charge. Jesus was born not only to save individuals, but to turn the world upside down, to redeem the corrupt and oppressive systems that create refugees and then scapegoat them. He came to teach that God's kingdom belongs to the outsiders fleeing tyrants, not to the powerful insiders sitting on thrones.

**Anti-scapegoating Work Today**

It is two thousand years after Jesus fled his country to escape danger, but people still have to flee their countries for fear of danger and destruction. Greed and corruption still plague our societies and children still die at the hands of unjust governments. The weeping of Rachel echoes through history. But maybe that is what Matthew is saying in his infancy narrative. As much as we would like Christ's work to be completed, we are still living in the age of Herod. We will continue to see oppression and greed, suffering and injustice, and the scapegoating of innocents until the kingdom of God comes fully. But thanks be to God, we have access to the antidote to scapegoating, the biblical message about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. From beginning to end, Jesus' story is the story of the refugee, the story of an outsider Israel becoming the insider in God's reign, the story of an innocent scapegoat who was blamed and killed by the powers of his day. Jesus' story should be our story as well.

As followers of Jesus, the scapegoat to end all scapegoats, we have the responsibility to carry forward the work of anti-scapegoating. Our government may maintain the power to harm the vulnerable among us, to detain and deport the immigrant, to separate families and destroy the lives of children, but we can work to proclaim the innocence of these scapegoats. The recognition of an innocent scapegoat is the key to unraveling the whole system of violent scapegoating. As more members of our society hear the Rachel voices that have been silenced and recognize the unjust suffering inflicted on our immigrant neighbors, less people will stand for that kind of scapegoating. Less people will vote for it. When we finally wrest control from the scapegoaters in our midst, it will become apparent to all who the real scapegoats have been—the outsiders, the sojourners, the marginalized among us. And then we can do what Jesus intended for his followers to do from the beginning: build God's kingdom around them. ■

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*Jennifer Garcia Bashaw (PhD, Fuller Seminary) is associate professor of New Testament and Christian Ministry at Campbell University in North Carolina. Dr. Bashaw is an ordained American Baptist minister who enjoys preaching as well training and resourcing pastors. She is the author of* Scapegoats: The Gospel through the Eyes of Victims*,* John for Normal People: A Guide through the Drama and Depth of the Fourth Gospel*, and* Serving Up Scripture: Interpreting the Bible for Yourself and Others *(coming Jan 2026).*

# A Cross-Cultural Ethics of Bible Translation

Kristofer Dale Phan Coffman

"To translate is to betray" is an Italian aphorism that biblical translators like to cite when introducing the difficulties of rendering ancient Hebrew and Greek into modern languages. The aphorism illustrates its own point, as the English rendering betrays both the brevity and the pun in the Italian, "*traduttore, traditore*," literally "translator, traitor." In their aphorism the Italians have encapsulated not only a linguistic, but also a historical observation, both of which have ramifications for the ethics of translating the Bible. As the skepticism in the aphorism alludes to, most discussions of Bible translation focus on a cautionary ethics, and it's there where we will also begin.

Reticence around translating scriptures has roots that reach back into antiquity. Folks in the western world may be familiar with the fact that both Judaism and Islam have branches that reject the translation of the *Torah* and the *Qur'an* on the grounds that a translation cannot capture the meaning of the original Hebrew or Arabic. This rejection of translation extends beyond the Abrahamic religions. In the Cambodian Buddhism in which my mother grew up, monks continue to chant sacred texts in Sanskrit and Pali rather than in Cambodian. Even when translations were made, their approval required special pleading.

The Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible known as the Septuagint presents an illustrative case. Greek speaking Judeans in the Diaspora needed a Bible that they could understand, but skepticism about the viability of translating from Hebrew into Greek led to the rise of the myth of the 72 elders. According to myth, recorded in the *Letter of Aristeas* and repeated by Philo of Alexandria, the Egyptian King Ptolemy II wanted a Greek copy of the Hebrew scriptures for his library. He assembled 72 elders (six from each of the 12 tribes of Israel) and placed them in separate rooms to do individual translations. When they brought their copies to them, they were all identical, proving that the translation had a divine provenance.

In the early 20th century, the incommensurability of languages became formalized in the linguistic theory of Ferdinand de Saussure. Saussure's linguistics distinguished between the signifier (the word that we use to refer to something) and the signified (the actual thing to which we are referring) and noted that the connection between the two is psychological, i.e. the signifier calls up an association in our minds. Because no two minds are alike, no two people will call up the same association even if using the same word. This concept applies with double force to signifiers in different languages. Even if the signified thing is the same, when two different languages describe it, they will inevitably call up mental associations based on the history and the culture of the respective languages. The end result of this linguistic theorizing is that it reframes translation. The translator no longer looks for equivalents between words, but instead tries to "draw" a Venn diagram in which the associations of a word in one language overlap as much as possible with a word in another.

Recognizing the impossibility of 1:1 translation raises a number of ethical concerns for the biblical translator. For one, the translator must be conscious of how they domesticate a biblical text. A translator domesticates a text when they choose terms that are familiar to their intended audience but which only loosely correspond to the original. For example, in Amos 5:24, the NRSV translates, "Instead let justice flow like a stream, and righteousness like a river that never goes dry." The Hebrew word translate "river" is *nachal* and it refers to an intermittent desert stream that flows during periods of rain, but is otherwise dry. In Arabic, they call it a *wadi* and those of us who grew up in the American Southwest borrow the Spanish word, *arroyo*, but there is no English equivalent. The word "river," in fact, calls up a totally different association for most English speakers. This kind of domestication raises the concern of whether the translator misleads their readers through making the text too familiar. If, as for many Americans, the 23rd Psalm calls up associations with verdant English pastures, has the translator done a disservice to their readers?

Beyond the problem of domestication lies the reality that the lack of 1:1 equivalents between words means that the translator exerts personal influence on a translation. They cannot simply be thought of as an algorithm or a machine that with sufficient training transforms one language into another. Instead, a biblical translator makes innumerable choices regarding how to express the text in English, choices that are informed by their own life stories, their own theology, and their own ear for how the English language should sound. One of the great ethical missteps of modern Bible translation is the way in which translation com-

mittees obfuscate the role of the translator. This is especially problematic in translations like the NRSV which pride themselves on their scholarly credentials; scholarship (as those of us involved in it know too well), is an inherently contested and ever-changing field. Knowing the identity and background of a scholar is an essential part of understanding the choices that they have made.

As important as these cautionary ethical considerations are and, as much as I hope that all biblical translators will be aware of them, I don't believe that they tell the whole story. From my perspective as a first-generation Cambodian(American), this approach to biblical translation, though scientific and scholarly, presents too static a picture to capture the ethical responsibilities of the translator.[1] As someone who has spent his life moving in different cultural and linguistic spaces, I believe that biblical translation can learn from the considerations of those of us who have to translate in real time. The reconsideration of translation through the first-generation experience has led me to reframe translating the Bible in terms of an ethics of care. This reframing changes the role of translator; rather than acting as the expert who transforms knowledge for the consumption of the uninitiated, the translator stands as a mediator between two conversation partners.

People come to the Bible with questions and hopes and fears. The biblical text comes with messages to speak into our realities. The translator stands between them, hears them both, and crafts their translation accordingly. This approach moves beyond the myth that we can draw a neat line between "translating" and "interpreting." All translation is interpretation and what matters is whether we have the courage to admit our role in that interpretation or not. The translator becomes a traitor when they fail to care for the participants in the conversation, and this duty of care runs both ways. On the one hand, a translation that willfully twists the biblical text betrays it. On the other, a translation that comes written at a level so educated or so formal that it is unintelligible to a congregation is also traitorous.

The great difficulty of thinking of translation in terms of an ethic of care is how few hard and fast rules there are. When I introduce this way of thinking to my students (most of whom are English monolinguals), the result is often a paralyzing fear: How can we dare to translate if we will inevitably get things wrong? The answer that I give, though unscientific, is to follow the advice of Martin Luther and "Sin boldly, but believe more boldly still!" The burden lies on us as translators to do our best, to show our cards and to acknowledge that we will inevitably betray one side or the other. Further, I remind them that this ethic requires thinking of translation as an ongoing conversation. This conversation involves confession of our errors and forgiveness and working to continually explain ourselves. Most of all, it's a conversation conditioned by love—love for the biblical text and love for the people who come to it seeking admonition and comfort.

Those of us who are first-generation Americans know that one of the profound paradoxes of our lives is that we will never speak our mother tongues, our heart languages, with one or more of our parents. When I speak English with my mother, it is her second language. When she speaks Cambodian to me, it is my second language. Something will always be lost in translation, but the bond between us overcomes that linguistic gap. I trust that the Holy Spirit will do the same with our translations of the Bible, bridging that gap between the ancient and the modern so that we can faithfully say "*traduttore, non traditore*" [translator, not traitor!]. ■

*Kristofer Dale Phan Coffman is assistant professor of New Testament at Luther Seminary. He brings his own experience as a first-generation Cambodian-American to his readings of the biblical text in an effort to help readers reframe their reading of ancient texts as a cross-cultural interaction, hoping to build skills both for the reading of the biblical text as well as the modern task of relating to people from cultures different than their own.*

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Dr. Patrick R. Anderson is the current editor. He earned a BA from Furman University, MDiv from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, and PhD from Florida State University. He is a professor, criminologist, pastor and writer. He and his wife, Carolyn, have been intimately involved in the development and operation of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship as well as several non-profit ministries among poor and disadvantaged people.

**OUR CONTACT INFORMATION**

**Pat Anderson**
P.O. Box 1238
Banner Elk, NC 28604

**Cell** (863) 207-2050
**E-mail** Drpatanderson@gmail.com

VISIT US ON OUR WEB SITE: **www.ChristianEthicsToday.com**