



RHODE ISLAND STATE COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

Public Policy Statement

A Call to Christian Hospitality

THE RHODE ISLAND STATE COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

Faith & Order Commission

Draft of June 19, 2009

A Call to Christian Hospitality

Principles for a Politic of Immigration in the U.S.

“Debate over Hispanic immigration can sometimes be a heated exchange of stories, a trading of emotive accounts of untimely deaths and unjust suffering. These stories are all too real, and therein lies their power to generate both compassion and anger.” The stories not only fuel confrontations, but direct a faithful follower of Christ to “fix” the problem. Of course, it’s not only Hispanics who suffer from the broken system but immigrants and refugees from Haiti, Liberia, Thailand, and China, to name a few countries of origin. The issues are compelling and complex, and in 2009 the system cannot be said to exemplify principles of justice, of the U.S. Constitution, nor of the faith received in Jesus Christ. It is the purpose of this paper to draw out Christian principles for civil legislation and social behavior as understood by the members and associated churches of the Rhode Island State Council of Churches. There are too many issues to address here; however, it is possible to identify common principles from Scripture, principles as understood from God’s action in history, and principles emergent from contemporary praxis of the Churches in public and pastoral experience. Overriding values of Christian faith as always are *caritas* (charitable love), and respect for human dignity (the image of God [*imago Dei*] in which all humans are created). These values find expression in particular ways in Scripture.

Biblical Principles

As God chooses and directs his people, Abraham, the first patriarch and progenitor of the Hebrew people, is called by the Lord to emigrate from his homeland and to become a sojourner in ancient Palestine. This sets the tone for a system of laws of hospitality. Repeatedly in the passages of the Torah, the Hebrews are enjoined to “remember” they spring from Abraham, a sojourner, and further that they “sojourned” in Egypt from the days of Joseph until the Exodus. The prescriptions of the Torah begin with Lev. 23:22: “When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor and for the alien: I am the LORD your God.” Further, “You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.” and “The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.” In general, Israel is required to treat aliens according to the same laws as citizens; and they are required to extend to aliens the same charity mandated for widows, orphans, and other poor.

Attitudinal acceptance of sojourners is not so much expressed in legal requirements as in stories of the Hebrew Scriptures. The seminal story is the description of the visitation by three representatives of the Lord to Abraham and Sarah at the terebinths of Mamre.

Abraham feeds and entertains the representatives lavishly before they continue on their way. Again, there is the story of Lot’s entertainment of two angels. Lot goes so far as to sacrifice the virginity of two daughters to licentious villagers, to protect his visitors from sexual assault.

Again, the story of Ruth and Boaz idealizes the hospitality Israel is called to extend to foreigners and gives flesh to the Torah passages requiring charity to aliens. Boaz, as a landowner, insists his workers not only follow the letter of the law for the benefit of Ruth, an indigent alien, but extends to her every hospitality and support. The story is, of course, a love story, and as such sets the highest standard of regard between alien and native citizen. Jesus’ parables of the New Testament extend the same principles into another era. His parable of the Samaritan woman at the well shows his inclusiveness of ministry across ethnic lines as well as gender barriers. His encounter and healing on behalf of the Syrophenician woman shows how an alien with an open heart may overcome ethnic prejudices. The parable of the sheep and goats in Matthew further spells out Jesus’ concept of a “safety net” for immigrants as well as other indigents: “I was hungry and you gave me

food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.”

The “safety net” was administered by religio-government officials in Biblical Israel and Judea according to the Deuteronomic reform and also by the earliest Apostolic community in Jerusalem as the Church was developing. The office of the first deacons was, among other things, to distribute charitable aid to indigent Greek as well as Jewish families. Again, the Apostle Paul organized aid across the communities of the eastern Mediterranean, without respect to citizenship or ethnicity.

This is not to say there were no barriers between ethnic groups in Palestine in Biblical times; but it is to say the value was placed on equality before God and an equitable distribution of public benefits and charity. “There shall be one law for the native and for the alien who resides among you.” To that, Jesus explicitly adds the ethic of “welcoming the stranger,” and Paul adds, “In the end, there are three things that last: faith, hope, and charity (χαριτας); and the greatest of these is charity.”

Principles from the Denominational Traditions

The same principles of equality before God of people of different ethnic origin is understood in the 21st century Church to extend to people of different races. Toward the same goals of hospitality and justice, the Church as a whole has committed herself to extra efforts to support and include people of different races. Inasmuch as “the alien who resides among you” is often a person of color, the Church’s efforts to overcome racial oppression in the USA reach special importance when considering problems of immigration.

All the Christian denominations in the US are immigrant churches. The history of our churches is a mixed record, though, and many of us have apparently forgotten our origins. Those congregations that remember their alien roots in a special way, Carl Dudley terms “pilgrim churches.” Whether or not we remember our immigrant roots, all of us adhere to the values exemplified in Jesus. In addition, lapses notwithstanding, we see the action and will of God in our experiences and the prayerful reflections of our leaders through history down to the present day.

We all give thanks that we have been allowed to take up residence in the US, and although not always “welcomed as sojourners” we have benefited from the openness and charity of those residents of the Western Hemisphere who have come before us, native Americans

and simply earlier immigrants. Partly from Scripture and partly from our experience as aliens ourselves, all of us maintain a policy of “welcoming the stranger.” There is nothing in any of our denominational documents to countermand or qualify the Biblical principles for treatment of aliens and sojourners of whatever status, described in the last section. We agree that immigrants and refugees of whatever status in the US should be accorded access to public services and benefits on the same basis as citizens. Further, it is clear that where public services are lacking or insufficient it is a responsibility of the churches to act toward filling the gaps.

War and its consequences are the particular concern of the “the historic peace churches” among the members of the Rhode Island State Council of Churches. Their concern leads them to advocate extra support for refugees from military action of the US and other forces, among immigrants to the US. Christian compassion leads the other Christian bodies to place a similar priority on support and settlement of refugees. Again, dominance of US industry in arms production and sales worldwide, makes the US complicit in perhaps all armed conflicts worldwide, regardless of official American involvement. This places a particular responsibility for refugees and victims of war on Americans of faith.

Further, it is broadly recognized than policies of empowerment and self-sufficiency are preferable to those of exclusively direct aid, in assistance to immigrants (as well as others) in need of help.

Denominational Consensus for Immigration Reform

Most of the denominational policy statements call for increased action and a better attitude within the churches to “welcome the stranger.”

There is more disagreement about the gate keeping role of the Federal government. We agree to the role of government to provide physical security against violence, crime, and invasion. To one degree or another we agree to the role of government to provide an economic environment for prosperity. Since one motivation for immigration is the relative prosperity of the US, it can be argued that a role of the Federal government is to protect US prosperity from decline from excessive immigration. However, it is not clear if the US economy is worsened or improved by immigration and consequently we don't have comprehensive agreement on ways to reform the US immigration process, quota system, or immigration or refugee policy in regard to individual countries. There is widespread agreement, however, that the existing system is unjust, arbitrary, and dysfunctional, and

there is a consensus in the Christian community that reform is necessary and urgent. Denominational policy statements include the following recommendations for Federal reform:

- Provide equal access to US immigration regardless of country of origin.
- Apply any “cap” for immigrant numbers equitably without regard to race, gender, economic level, or political affiliation.
- Prioritize admissions to reunite families.
- Prioritize admission of refugees without respect to political leanings or affiliations of home governments. Refugees and asylum seeker numbers should not be included in immigration caps.
- Provide for admissions to meet labor force needs.
- Provide for legalization of undocumented immigrants who have been in the US for a certain length of time without requiring them to return to their country of origin.
- Cease punitive government actions.
- Provide legal due process to all persons.

Attitudinal barriers to immigrants are another dimension of the problem. Hate and fear are debilitating to sojourners and destructive of community. Everyone can find themselves in their grip; they’re part of original sin. Public officials especially are at risk of pandering to hate and fear, as they are the basis of demagoguery which can strengthen weak leadership. However, we have seen leaders – and followers – of every sector to fall into their grip. We have only to compare the hospitality of Boaz (of the story of Ruth) with the policies of typical state governors to see the dimensions of the our attitude gaps. Since it’s “perfect love [which] casts out fear,” and God is the source of perfect love, it becomes the responsibility of the churches to address the disparity. However, aside from denominational bodies, most members of our congregations are unaware or unmotivated to take action. To address the Church’s responsible part in immigration reform, denominational policies include these recommendations:

- o Raise awareness of problems of immigrants.
- o Provide direct services to immigrants and refugees in need, including advocacy.
- o Provide ministry to detained immigrants.
- o Celebrate cultural diversity of congregations and neighborhoods.
- o Assist ethnic communities to preserve their native cultures.

- o Call legislators, public officials, community leaders, and media commentators to account for their policies, pronouncements and actions.
- o Work among the denominations, congregations and other agencies to address the problems of immigration reform.

These recommendations, of course, rest on the assumption of loyalty to the legal processes of legislation and administration of justice. Quakers have considered this issue more explicitly than many denominations: “Friends have always counseled loyal obedience to the state, subject to the religious principle that their first allegiance is to God. The state has no claim to moral infallibility. If its commands appear to be contrary to divine will, Friends can only take prayerful counsel to arrive at a Christian decision. When the decision is to refuse obedience to laws, in accordance with conscience, it is usual for Friends to make clear the grounds of their actions. If the decision involves legal penalties, generally have suffered willingly and fearlessly for the sake of their convictions. Friends not personally involved strengthen the meeting community by supporting their fellow members with spiritual encouragement and, when necessary, with material aid.”

Under similar rubrics some denominational officials (Episcopalians, Congregationalists, Presbyterians) have advocated civil disobedience to the extent of providing sanctuary in Church buildings for undocumented immigrants under or fearing deportation orders. However, there has been no authoritative commitment at the judicatory or national level for such an initiative in recent years. It would appear that a more “obedient” role in the reform process enjoys wider acceptance and likely a better effect for the Council and her members at present. At the same time, public expression of outrage at oppressive enforcement actions against undocumented immigrants and other sojourners seems the least obligation of the religious community.

Where do we go from here?

There are so many issues involved in immigration reform it is surprising to see substantial agreement on most of them among the different denominations. Again, the Biblical record is clear: we are called to “welcome the stranger.” The act and policy of welcoming can serve as the useful goal for Church practices and also Church supported public policy. It is the aim of this document to provide explicit theological basis for Church action at every level. It is not the role of the Faith & Order Commission to design the strategy nor conduct the campaigns.

In many venues, including Rhode Island, councils of Churches have already taken positions supporting and stimulating reforms to welcome the sojourners. However, many if not most of our congregations are unaware or at least uninvolved in the reform movement. Thus mobilization of the congregations and judicatory leaders as a whole would seem the goal for the near future.