

AFFIRMING THE DIGNITY AND SELF-WORTH OF IMMIGRANTS
A Resolution approved by General Synod XX of the United Church of Christ (1995)

HISTORY

This resolution originated in the Mission and Outreach Committee of the Orinda Community Church (UCC) (California) in response to growing intolerance directed toward “non-European” immigrants, a great number of whom are naturalized citizens of long standing who are increasingly being blamed for our country’s economic and social ills.

After this process had begun in the Orinda Church, an initiative denying education and health care to undocumented immigrants was placed on the California Ballot in November 1994. Proposition 187 was overwhelmingly passed by California voters.

In the meantime the Bay Association of the Northern California Nevada Conference, at its Fall Meeting on October 23, 1994, voted approval of a resolution entitled “Affirming the Dignity and Self-Worth of Immigrants.” This Resolution was forwarded to both the Northern California Nevada Conference and to the General Synod of the United Church of Christ. On May 20, 1995, the Annual Meeting of the Northern California Nevada Conference voted approval of the Resolution.

DISCUSSION

In her book, Beyond Borders, Elizabeth G. Ferris states: “In today’s world, Christians are challenged by the Gospel to respond to the needs of uprooted people, to extend hospitality and to work for justice and reconciliation. In seeking to put their faith into practice, they are often led to confront difficult questions.”

“The challenge of living in accord with Christian beliefs in the values of the realm of God often conflicts with the pressures of living in a world of nation-states based on a different set of values. Christians are not outside those national values . . . and in many situations, churches play a role in legitimizing their governments, even governments which abuse human rights and limit the freedoms of churches . . . What does it mean to live by the values of the realm of God ‘in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek’ – when the world is structured into more than 170 different nation states and where the country in which you were born determines your chances to live? In today’s world, should Christians be working for the abolition of national borders – when it is clear that the existence of these borders serves to keep needy people out? It is difficult to imagine a world “beyond borders” where people could move and work freely without impediment by national governments.”

Our spiritual tradition affirms that we are one family. We offer this Proposal as a time when Xenophobia runs rampant among us. Increasingly our society is divided by racism and prejudice. We believe that immigrants make a positive contribution to the economy and well-being of our country. Blaming immigrants for societal problems is counterfactual and wrong. History teaches us that this is what happened in Germany in the 1930’s, leading to the Holocaust under the Nazi regime. It could happen here if we allow people to single out ethnic scapegoats and create a system where there is surreptitious tattling about fellow human beings. If we do

that, we have gone a long way toward perpetrating the conditions which led to the persecution and death of millions of Jews and others a little more than a half-century ago.

Not only does the condemnation of immigrants go against the teachings and values of our faith, it also flies in the face of the fundamental values and truths upon which this country was founded. Emma Lazarus said it best in her words carved in stone upon our nation's very symbol of hope, freedom and liberty: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shores. Send these, the homeless, tempest tossed, to me. I lift my lamp beside the golden door." This has ever been the proud watchword of welcome to our country, a symbol of our strength, our greatness and our uniqueness as a nation and a people. Most of us are here today because this nation has embraced (at least for many) the noble and compassionate tradition of opening our borders to the downtrodden, the hungry in search of a better life, and the refugee fleeing political, social or economic oppression. Let us work to end every effort to reject immigrants, and embark on another course, faithful to God's will and the teachings of Jesus, a course which welcomes the stranger in our midst.

RESOURCES

Resource information focusing on this issue is available from the Interfaith Coalition for Immigrant Rights, c/o NSDF, 995 Market Street, Suite #702, San Francisco, California 94103. Telephone: 415/227-0388. Facsimile: 415/882-1540; and the Office for Church in Society.

RESOLUTION

WHEREAS many of the more than 220 million citizens of the United States, other than indigenous native Americans, are either immigrants or descendants of immigrants;

WHEREAS these immigrants and their descendants, by their labor, creativity, energy, intellect, and dedication, have helped to make this nation great;

WHEREAS millions of immigrants and their descendants have given their lives to the service of this country;

WHEREAS the United States historically has been, and for many continues to be, a land of opportunity and refuge for people of developing nations and nations in crisis;

WHEREAS many of the people who desire to emigrate to the United States, are so desperate they try to enter the country illegally;

WHEREAS an increasing number of political leaders place the blame for our social problems, including unemployment and crime, on immigrants, undocumented or otherwise;

WHEREAS these political leaders influence public opinion and policy;

WHEREAS our country's social and economic problems have many causes, including abuse of power, selfishness, racism, ethnocentrism and greed;

WHEREAS as Christian people, we claim for ourselves and we proclaim to the world that God has spoken, saying: “You shall not wrong strangers or oppress them, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Exodus 22:21); “One law and one ordinance shall be for you and for the stranger who sojourns with you” (Numbers 15:16); “Continue to love each other like brothers and sisters, and remember always to welcome strangers, for by doing this, some people have entertained angels without knowing it” (Hebrews 13:1-2); and “In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28); and

WHEREAS in Matthew 25:31-45 where Jesus talks about being hungry, thirsty and a stranger, the intent of this passage for Jesus is to clearly declare that how we treat each person, regardless of condition, is how we treat God. “Whatever you do for the least of my brothers and sisters, you do for me.” For the Christian all persons are our sisters and brothers. “I was a stranger and you welcomed me” should guide our ethic and action;

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that we believe the General Synod of the United Church of Christ should speak with a prophetic voice of justice and reason on this matter;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Twentieth General Synod of the United Church of Christ affirms the dignity and self-worth of all people and deploras any attempt to blame immigrants, undocumented or otherwise, for our nation’s social problems;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the General Synod encourage the national bodies, Conferences, churches and members of the United Church of Christ to oppose any effort to deny benefits to immigrants, undocumented or otherwise;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that General Synod also encourages UCC members to communicate with elected representatives, urging them to resist the temptation to scapegoat immigrants, undocumented or otherwise, and, further, to seek fair and just solutions to the problems that confront us;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that members of local churches be encouraged to engage the issue in study and prayer and seek ways of addressing it within their churches and communities; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the United Church Board for World Ministries, the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries and the Office for Church in Society are urged to work together to take the initiative to organize a “Peace Witness” on the United States-Mexico border to observe and monitor the warfare against illegal immigrants and the human rights violation of those crossing the border in cooperation with other Christian Peace and Justice organizations.

Subject to the availability of funds.