

NAVIGATING THE WATERS OF POLITICS AND FAITH:  
THE ISSUE OF IMMIGRATION IN LOCAL CHRISTIAN CHURCH  
(DISCIPLES OF CHRIST) CONGREGATIONS IN TEXAS

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## CHAPTER ONE: THE QUESTION AT HAND

This chapter aims to introduce the question at hand of this project, namely, the intersection of religion and politics. I argue that it is crucial to understand the historical development of the Disciples of Christ (Christian Church), henceforth DOC, and its history of engaging the issue of modern immigration, particularly from Latin America. The discussion will show that the DOC's ecclesial identity through its tenants, beliefs, and immigration resolutions translates into local churches. This translation helps to understand why local churches are navigating the waters of politics and faith. In what follows, the chapter, first, will introduce the question at hand for this project; second, explain the author's ecclesial location; third, argue for the importance of the project; and, finally, demonstrate the tension between denominational resolutions vis-à-vis local congregations around immigration.

### **The Question at Hand: The Intersection of Religion and Politics**

In the United States, there is a familiar adage regarding proper conversation etiquette: do not talk about religion and do not talk about politics. The phrase “do not get political” is common in the US American lexicon; it is “embedded in our vocabularies and jumps out of our mouths almost reflexively.”<sup>1</sup> While this phrase might be appropriate around the Thanksgiving table, what happens when the lines of politics and faith meet? In other words, is there a space within the local church for conversations to take place at the intersection of politics and religion? For some, this is a frightening question to consider. Ministers often hear from congregants that a sermon,

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah Stewart Holland, Beth Silvers, *I Think You're Wrong (but I'm Listening): A Guide to Grace-Filled Political Conversations* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2019), 1.



prayer, communion table mediation, or newsletter article was “too political” or “not political enough,” even if this was not the minister's intent.

In my ministry context, I have heard both sides of this argument. Some members want worship to be a time to disconnect from the busyness and stress of life and the constant political fights/debates found in state legislatures and the US Congress, the White House, and on social media platforms. It weighs heavy on their hearts, minds, and souls. They view worship as a time to reconnect with God and to hear the good news of Jesus the Christ. These members want to be refreshed, not bombarded with what is plaguing the world. Interjecting “politics” leads to increased anxiety and stress, the antithesis of being in a “sanctuary.” Hearing statements, political or taken as such, particularly from the pulpit, can be “seen as a violent act, given the presumption that the congregation cannot respond.”<sup>2</sup> There is no dialogue; the minister has command of the room. Some have argued that a minister needs to embody the notion of “become all things to all people” (1 Cor. 9:22b, NRSV)<sup>3</sup> and not speak directly to an issue. Members who hold this theological/political belief argue that a minister should never tell or coerce their congregation how to think or vote about an issue in their community, state, or nation. Some ministers present multiple viewpoints and allow the hearers to reflect upon their relationship with God. Using this latter approach as a guide for preaching and teaching, the minister avoids conflict so that congregational harmony may be maintained, which is the goal. By not addressing the issues of a community or nation, the local congregation focuses on what they have in common, not what will drive them apart. In an era when US American Mainline Protestant

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<sup>2</sup> Christian Century Editorial Board, “Do Politics Belong in Church? 11 Theologians Weigh In,” *The Christian Century*, September 24, 2018, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/opinion/do-politics-belong-church>.

<sup>3</sup> The use of isolated scriptural texts in this project is not intended to be scriptural warrants per se, but rather a way to call attention to the Gospel's ethos and worldview in regard to a theme.

Christianity continues to decline, more congregations are worried about payroll and keeping the lights on rather than thematizing divisive issues.<sup>4</sup> Thus, it is agreed and understood that “political issues” need to stay outside of worship or ecclesial Bible<sup>5</sup> studies because a common consensus may not or cannot be reached, which could lead to strife, division, loss of members, and loss of income to the congregation.

On the other hand, some members want to hear a Christian theological response to the critical issues arising in society. They ponder the questions, “what is the Christian response to gun violence, immigration, health care, or income inequality, etc.? Shouldn’t the words of Jesus the Christ have an impact on the community in which the church resides? Is ignoring the problem refusing to confront faith and life?” Some people, however, take stances that seem harsh to other followers of Christ. For example, Jim Meisner, Jr. wrote regarding the separating of migrant children from their families at the Southern US border, “if you see suffering and want it to stop, you’re doing what Christ teaches. If you make excuses, you’re not a Christian. You’re not a Christian if you support [separation at the Southern US Border]. You worship a false god of your own creation. Your prayers are empty words to yourself.”<sup>6</sup> While his words are quite blunt, they speak to his passion for integrating his faith, the world, and his political outlook as well to a central practice by which Christians interpret their relationship to God with respect to loving neighbor. Some congregations may not be prepared or willing to have such strong statements from the pulpit or in their respective Bible studies classes; for the minister who offers these

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<sup>4</sup> Pew Research Center, “In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace,” Pew Research Center, accessed June 21, 2020, <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>.

<sup>5</sup> As an ordained minister of a Protestant denomination, when I use the term “Bible,” I am referring to the 66 books of the Protestant Canon.

<sup>6</sup> Jim Meisner Jr., “The U.S. Migrant Crisis Is a Test for Christians,” *Faith on the Fridge*, June 29, 2019, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/faithonthefridge/2019/06/the-u-s-migrant-crisis-is-a-test-for-christians/>.

strong messages, the words they are employing are consonant with the Word of God. Keeping silent, it is believed, is to deny the message of God and the importance of transformation in the world and God's reign here and now. Much like the prophets in the Old Testament, these ministers are speaking a powerful truth to a community that needs to hear a word from God. Some people might be ready to hear this news, while others may not be.

Supporters of this specific theological viewpoint find deep meaning in the Book of James, which states that “faith without actions has no value at all” (2:20 CEB). This understanding of living out one's faith, as well as the teachings of Jesus, helps frame their theological and missional outlook. In their mind, if the minister does not speak directly to these issues, then she/he is not faithful to the Gospel. By not speaking, naming, or addressing the problem facing our communities, state, or nation, then what is the point of the Christian faith? Rev. Lee Hull Moses articulated this notion well when she spoke about the Neo-Nazi rallies and protests in Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017: “I wouldn't be doing my job, I told more than one parishioner, had I not mentioned Charlottesville the weekend after Heather Heyer was killed by white nationalists in 2017. Can we call ourselves followers of the Prince of Peace and not condemn violence born of bigotry and hate? Likewise, I don't see how we can read the story of Jesus welcoming the children and not have something to say about the migrant children separated from their parents at our Southern border.”<sup>7</sup>

I find myself caught between these two opposing viewpoints on Sunday mornings. Because of the polarization of political discourse in the United States and the struggle some ministers (like myself) have balancing politics and faith, I have chosen to investigate how

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<sup>7</sup> Christian Century Editorial Board, “Do Politics Belong in Church?”

ministers in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the state of Texas strike a balance between speaking about a “hot topic” issue and remaining silent. This project will focus specifically on US immigration as a test case.

One reason for examining the intersection of politics and religion in a local congregation is because I serve a “purple” congregation. A “purple” congregation is one comprised of both conservative and progressive political and theological ideologies. This term is derived from the colors associated with the Republican and Democrat parties: red and blue, respectively. The “mixing” of these colors results in purple. Also, the church I serve is located in Texas. Although distant from the Mexican border, the realities of the border are close to the church. Thus, the relationship between the United States and Mexico regarding the flow of people from Mexico and other Latin American countries into the United States has been a tense one and has only escalated in recent years.<sup>8</sup> It is also a tension that is found today in local Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) congregations in Texas.

### **Author’s Ecclesial Background**

I serve First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Longview, Texas, as the Associate Minister for Family Life. In my ministry, I have a wide range of duties, including worship, preaching, pastoral care, education, and Bible studies. During these activities, I must minister, guide, and educate persons from various political and theological backgrounds. I also have a unique relationship with First Christian Church, as it is the church where I was born and raised in the faith. I have many family members that regularly attend: my mother, my wife’s parents, and

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<sup>8</sup> Arturo Sarukhan, “The U.S.-Mexico Relationship Is Dangerously On the Edge,” *Order From Chaos* (blog), *Brookings*, February 3, 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2017/02/03/the-u-s-mexico-relationship-is-dangerously-on-the-edge/>.

my wife's grandfather. I have known many of the congregants most of my life. I believe, however, it has not hindered my ability to provide ministry and pastoral care to the congregation; conversely, it has enhanced my ministry by helping me understand their history, social locations, and pastoral needs. It is this intimate knowledge, history, connection, and relationship with this congregation that has led me to this project. I want to be able to provide the best ministry opportunities and educational guidance that I can while staying true to the calling of my life and my understanding of the foundations of the Gospel of Jesus the Christ.

In 2017, First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) conducted an all-church survey with over 75% of the members participating, which concluded that the congregation represented an almost perfect bell curve of theological thought and political diversity. Despite the difference, the data also named that the church has high spiritual vitality. The figure was developed by examining the spiritual impact on a person's life outside the church and the connection of faith that one experiences from day to day.<sup>9</sup> This vitality helps to unite the congregation to God and also unifies the members to each other. The membership has found a way to "put aside" differences regarding faith and politics and chooses to focus on God and their spirituality.

### **The Importance of this Project**

While the church community has found ways to "agree to disagree" regarding issues of politics and faith, this civility is not being modeled in society or by elected officials. I found myself wondering if First Christian Church was an anomaly or a model for how Christian communities should live out their faith and lives. Today, the commonly understood societal boundaries between partisan political position statements and religiosity through the

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<sup>9</sup> Holy Cow! Consulting, *Vital Signs Report to First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) of Longview, Texas*, 26.

interpretation of the biblical text are being held in tension. This tension has happened before in our nation's history, but today it is immensely heightened. Some people are turning to their political party's platform, position statements, as well as interpretations from political pundits and commentators for their sole source of information; it through this lens that they view the world. This will, in turn, influence how they read, understand, articulate, and live out their religious faith. They are finding ways to make their theology fit their politics. This raises an essential question for ministers today: How does this interplay and merging of these realms (political and theological) affect a person's hermeneutics, that is, how do they understand and interpret the biblical text for today? On top of that, people have a difficult time spotting weakness in their own arguments.<sup>10</sup> What are the implications of being unaware of one's own biases?

Concerning immigration, some have argued that religious perspectives have been absent from conversations.<sup>11</sup> Mark Wingfield writes, "the church loses its voice on theology because important biblical concepts have been wrongly labeled 'politics' and therefore off-limits."<sup>12</sup> Thus, a paradox is formed. Wingfield argues that declaring that a topic is "political" in certain Christian communities shuts down the conversation almost immediately; this has been deemed off limits and not within the realm of theological contemplation, interpretation, and understanding. It could be claimed that this tactic is used so that a Christian can avoid having to investigate one's embedded theology in light of situations arising in society such as

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<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth Kolbert, "Why Facts Don't Change Our Minds," *The New Yorker*, February 19, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/02/27/why-facts-dont-change-our-minds>.

<sup>11</sup> Ruth Melkonian-Hoover, "The Politics of Religion and Immigration," *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 6, no. 3 (2008): 26.

<sup>12</sup> Mark Wingfield, "The Problem with Not Talking About Politics at Church," *Baptist News Global*, August 11, 2016, <https://www.baptistnews.com/article/the-problem-with-not-talking-about-politics-at-church/#.Wvyi8iAh3b0>.

homelessness, racialization, and immigration. Christians, however, cannot “lose [their] voice on biblical teaching just because it intersects politics.”<sup>13</sup>

These “political” items on closer examination are deemed such because they might have a deeper theological dimension to them which calls for a Christian response. However, by claiming that politics are off limits within the context of a Christian community, then these conversations and theological explorations do not happen. This cycle of avoidance and labeling items as off limits has allowed the Church to remain silent on important social events and conversations. A Bible study or Sunday School teacher should not hold a debate on the Affordable Care Act, rather, the discussion should center around biblical principles and how they inform the application of governmental policies and responses to issues in the US American society.<sup>14</sup> These conversations, however, will not happen if the barrier between politics and religion remains erected.

Our society is becoming more polarized regarding partisan politics. As mentioned, this is not a new trend in American societal discourse; however, it has intensified over the past three - and now four - presidential election cycles and is expected to continue past the 2020 presidential election.<sup>15</sup> The inability to have honest conversations about politics and faith is even influencing relationships and social gatherings and interactions.<sup>16</sup> A 2018 study found “Thanksgiving

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Pew Research Center, “Partisan Polarization Surges in Bush, Obama Years: Trends in American Values 1987-2012,” The Pew Research Center, June 4, 2012, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2012/08/13/partisan-polarization-surges-in-bush-obama-years/>.

<sup>16</sup> I am aware that during the 2020 COVID pandemic and subsequent shelter-in-place orders, restrictions on gatherings, conversations, interactions, and ministries changed and often became more challenging.

celebrations [in 2016] were about 30 to 50 minutes shorter for Americans who crossed partisan lines for the holiday than those who traveled to areas that voted like their own.”<sup>17</sup>

There is an awareness of the political and theological differences in our society and churches, but these differences are not discussed in a way that will promote open conversations, active learning, and mutual understanding. Churches and religious communities are uniquely positioned to speak to these differences particularly within politics because “they stand at the intersection of public and private life, serving simultaneously as arbiters of social relations and purveyors of private values.”<sup>18</sup> Differences in theology and doctrine have been present in Christianity from its beginning. Many of the letters and epistles in the New Testament are encouraging the Christian community to remember the teachings of Jesus the Christ and to “be united in the same mind and purpose” (1 Cor. 1:10 NRSV). Even with this admonishment, denominations and Christian communities have separated or split from one another to be more like-minded in theological and doctrinal beliefs. A group believes their way of understanding God, Jesus the Christ, and ministry needs to be promoted and cannot align with the original group. For example, the Church of Christ separated from the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the division has only become more extensive. Both denominations proclaim Jesus as the Christ and affirm the movement of God through the Holy Spirit, but it is the differing interpretations and emphasis of the teachings of Jesus the Christ that

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<sup>17</sup> Niraj Chokshi, “Thanksgiving Got Shorter After the 2016 Election, Study Says. You Can Guess Why.,” *The New York Times*, May 31, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/31/science/thanksgiving-political-views.html>.

<sup>18</sup> Anna Greenberg, “The Church and the Revitalization of Politics and Community,” *Political Science Quarterly* 115, no. 3 (2000): 380.



have contributed to further theological disagreement. Does this have to be the case? Can Christianity survive by continuing to divide itself for the sake of theological purity?

Moreover, tension can be found within a congregation regarding biblical interpretation, application, and method of understanding the movement of God. If the members of First Christian Church have a high spiritual vitality together while having differing views of God, Christ, ministry, and more, why are they able to put those differences aside in worship but not in the study of the Bible or Church School? What can be learned or gained through these conversations where differing views can be heard and discussed? If people do not feel “allowed” to share their thoughts, feelings, wonderings, and questions with other followers of Christ, why would we expect them to return? How can we expect them to learn and grow? If people are not finding a community in which to be authentic, then why participate? Christian Piatt, a Disciples of Christ minister and author, asks, “if we can’t ask the tough, keep-you-awake-at-night questions within our faith communities, then what good are they?”<sup>19</sup> Can ministers help congregations navigate the often-turbulent waters of theological and political issues and disagreements so that “in all things Christ might be glorified” (2 Thess. 1:12)?

This project aims to ponder and engage these questions as well as seek answers where possible. The objectives of this project are to analyze how ministers in Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) congregations navigate the intersection of politics and religion in their congregations, ministries, worship, and preaching. This project will examine the methods for change in a congregation to help the church move toward a more open, honest, and faith-filled conversation about their faith and politics. More specifically, this project raises the question: in a

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<sup>19</sup> Christian Piatt, ed., *Banned Questions About the Bible*, Banned Questions Series (St. Louis, Mo.: Chalice Press, 2011), xi.

congregation comprised of different theological and political beliefs, how does a minister “navigate” these waters regarding the issue of immigration in the United States of America—the “hot” topic issue for this project?

This project aims to discover and uncover the political and personal arguments for or against immigration as examined through a theological framework. This project serves to assist ministers in reaching a fuller awareness of the subject so they can best articulate their positions within their ministry sites through direct outreach actions, theological contemplation, and examining US American history and current governmental actions (both state and federal). Through these hermeneutics, ministers will be able to address in their own ministry context ways that immigration can be discussed and taught in a variety of methods such as direct engagement as well as worship or liturgical offerings. This study will examine the theological positions of 5 ministers (1 female, 4 male) from the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the state of Texas regarding immigration to get a glimpse of the moral and political complexity of the issue.

### **Disciples of Christ and its “Position” on Immigration**

The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and in Canada is a Protestant Christian denomination of about 500,000 members across 3200 congregations.<sup>20</sup> While the majority of its members are of Anglo/European descent, the Disciples of Christ (DOC) has a wide range of different racial and ethnic churches and members including Latinxs,<sup>21</sup> Asian Americans, and African Americans. The Disciples of Christ was birthed out of the Restoration

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<sup>20</sup> Communication Ministries in the Office of the General Minister and President, “Discover the Disciples,” Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) of the United States and Canada, accessed June 2, 2020, <http://disciples.org/our-identity/discover-the-disciples/>.

<sup>21</sup> The term “Latinx” will be employed in this work as a gender-neutral form of Latina/o.

Movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century; its aim was to unite the Church universal back to one body instead of the denominations and factions that were prevalent then and today.

Unlike other denominations, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) does not have an “official” creed or statement of belief that all members must agree to prior to their membership. During the formation of this movement, the founders believed that there is only one essential faith. For them, there is one unifying belief that all members must agree on, which is that Jesus the Christ is the Lord and Savior of the world.<sup>22</sup> Anything outside of this one principle, such as the nature of Christ, how one is saved, how one evangelizes, or the interpretation of Scripture, is up for discussion within the context of the church community or congregation. One’s faith and the guidance of the Holy Spirit contribute to and inform a person’s theological foundation and interpretive lens. This is echoed in the Identity Statement of the Disciples of Christ, which reads, “We are Disciples of Christ, a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. As part of the one body of Christ, we welcome all to the Lord’s Table as God has welcomed us.”<sup>23</sup>

The DOC has strong ecumenical relationships and strives to find places where Christians can serve and work together, crossing denominational and theological lines and categories. Many congregations across the United States find ministry partners within their own communities who share similar theological and missional beliefs. Through these relationships, congregations gain a greater understanding of who God is, what God is calling humanity to do, and how the principles of Christ’s teaching can be understood.

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<sup>22</sup> Communication Ministries in the Office of the General Minister and President, “Our Identity,” Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), accessed June 2, 2020, <http://disciples.org/our-identity/>.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

The denomination has also decided to align itself with four priorities that will guide the ministries of the denomination as well as local congregations. In 2001, the denomination set a goal of 1000 new church starts with a completion date of 2020. Many of the churches started were non-English speaking, immigrant faith communities. The Disciples Mission Fund announced in May 2020 that the goal of 1000 new church starts and revitalizations had been exceeded.<sup>24</sup> Another priority of the denomination is to become a pro-reconciliation and anti-racism denomination. This calls for all ministries, regions, areas, and local congregations to find avenues to foster healing and wholeness in their community. Although racism is too often framed as an African American and Anglo issue, this mindset allows for the church to begin to consider the implications of welcoming the stranger, hosting the other, and seeing the world through their eyes and listening to their understanding of the Bible, ministry, and action.<sup>25</sup> Racism needs to be reframed in order for all followers of Christ to employ their faithfulness in bringing forth God's realm, where all persons are viewed as bearers of God's image. De La Torre argues that racism is not merely an action but a series of beliefs that a community upholds and enforces through social norms and power structures.<sup>26</sup> To reflect this position, the DOC states:

The Pro-reconciliation/Anti-Racism Initiative was founded upon the need to make visible God's beloved community. It invites the church to listen to the once silenced voices of its racial/ethnic communities, learn from their wisdom and gain insight from their leadership. It calls the church to discernment and prayer, study of the scriptures and reflection, dialogue, and table fellowship. The true goal is to transform, strengthen and deepen the church's spirituality, resulting in a

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<sup>24</sup> Disciples Mission Fund, "Pentecost Offering," Disciples Mission Fund of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), accessed July 3, 2020, <https://disciplesmissionfund.org/special-offerings/pentecost/>.

<sup>25</sup> Communication Ministries in the Office of the General Minister and President, "The Four Priorities of the Church," Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), accessed June 2, 2020 <http://disciples.org/our-identity/the-four-priorities-of-the-church/>

<sup>26</sup> Miguel A. De La Torre, *Reading the Bible from the Margins* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 2002), 20-21.

community that understands its mission to be about bringing justice and salvation to the world.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, the DOC is moving to construe anti-racism not simply around anti-racist actions but also around beliefs.

The current General Minister and President, Rev. Teresa Hord Owens, has been active in this particular priority. She has joined with Disciples of Christ minister, the Rev. William Barber, II in the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival. This organization calls on all people, not just faith leaders, to seek out ways to bring wholeness, hospitality, and justice in a variety of areas for some of the most vulnerable populations in the United States. Rev. Owens is modeling how faith can help a person to reframe and rethink their political positions and actions. Her voice is being heard across the country addressing issues of race, injustice, and immigration reform.

In concert with the above initiative, as part of the General Ministries of the Church, the Disciples of Christ have a Refugee and Immigration Ministry. It aims to “welcome the stranger” (Matt. 25:31-40) by advocating for the immigrant population and guiding refugees through the resettlement process.<sup>28</sup> Since 1949, this ministry has helped over 37,000 refugees and continues to support programs and ministries specifically targeting and helping the immigrant community.<sup>29</sup> Recently this ministry has been active in many different aspects of immigration at the Southern United States border. They have advocated for the ending of child separation and

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<sup>27</sup> Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), “The Four Priorities of the Church,”

<sup>28</sup> Disciples Home Missions, “Refugee and Immigration Ministries,” Disciples Home Missions, accessed June 1, 2020, <https://www.discipleshomemissions.org/missions-advocacy/refugee-immigration-ministries/>.

<sup>29</sup> Disciples Home Missions, “About Us,” Disciples Home Missions, accessed June 1, 2020. <https://www.discipleshomemissions.org/missions-advocacy/refugee-immigration-ministries/about>

the practice of persons waiting for their immigration or asylum in Mexico.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, the ministry called on local congregations to support those persons in their churches and communities who had legal immigration status under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals or DACA while they waited on the United States' Supreme Court decision on whether the Trump Administration could end the program which would lead to hundreds of thousands of people being deported.

The DOC has taken several denominational stances regarding immigration. Every two years the denomination gathers in a General Assembly. During this time, resolutions are presented from the General Board of the Disciples of Christ for consideration. Given the denomination structure, the local church is autonomous and can govern itself in a way that is acceptable to the congregation. Thus, General Assembly resolutions are non-binding to a local congregation and are referred to as a "sense of the assembly." One indication that such resolutions do exert some normative force is that some conserving congregations leave the denomination because they perceive such resolutions as too "liberal" or "progressive." Resolutions act as guides for the ministries at the General level and "take the pulse" of those gathered at the General Assemblies.

In 1981, the DOC adopted a resolution concerning undocumented persons in the United States. Citing its own Declaration and Purpose Statement, the DOC called on all members of the church to "reach out to all who suffer, especially those who are deprived of their human and civil rights, as are undocumented persons." Furthermore, it asserted that "aid to these persons

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<sup>30</sup> See President Trump's "Zero-Tolerance for Offenses Under 8 U.S.C. 1325(.a)" issued on April 11, 2018. <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/attorney-general-announces-zero-tolerance-policy-criminal-illegal-entry>.

constitutes a true witness of Christ.”<sup>31</sup> This resolution called on the local church to become advocates for those who do not have a voice in society due to fear or immigration status. That same year, the DOC recognized the needs of the refugee and immigrant communities and called on congregations to survey and respond to these needs through public and private services.<sup>32</sup> In 1997, the denomination reaffirmed the call to help and support the “least of these” who are our “brothers and sisters.” The DOC asked regional and local ministries to find ways to support activities that helped those on the margins of society, specifically the immigrant community. Citing a resolution passed in 1963, the General Church reminded its members that “every person in need has every right to call upon the resources of the community without embarrassment and without being assigned second-class citizenship.”<sup>33</sup>

As a response to the growing issue of immigration, a group of Disciples of Christ clergy, in collaboration with non-profit organizations, formed a ministry that speaks directly to the immediate needs of those coming into the country through the southern border. Humane Borders, a non-profit organization, places water stations throughout the deserts of Arizona on commonly used migrant paths in the Senora Desert. They provide life-giving and life-saving water for migrants who have made a long and grueling journey to the United States. In Emergency

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<sup>31</sup> Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), “8144- Resolution Concerning Undocumented Process in the U.S.A.”, accessed June 2, 2020, <https://www.discipleshomemissions.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/8144-UndocumentedPersonsInTheUS.pdf>.

<sup>32</sup> Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), “8146- Meeting Needs of Immigrants in Our Communities,” accessed June 2, 2020, <https://www.discipleshomemissions.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/8146-MeetingNeedsOfImmigrantsInOurCommunities.pdf>.

<sup>33</sup> Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), “9720- the Least of These... Brothers and Sisters,” accessed June 2, 2020, <https://www.discipleshomemissions.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/9720-TheLeastOfTheseBrothersAndSisters.pdf>.

Resolution 0128<sup>34</sup>, the Disciples of Christ discussed and adopted a measure that called for the “change of the United States/Mexico border policies” and endorsed the work of Humane Borders to provide humanitarian aid to those coming into the United States via the border with Mexico.<sup>35</sup> This resolution was in response to the death of 17 immigrants in a twenty-four-hour period in May 2001 in Arizona.<sup>36</sup> Since January 1999, over 3000 people have died in the deserts of Arizona trying to reach their desired destination in the United States.<sup>37</sup>

This resolution provides an explicitly stated theological and biblical rationale for supporting and uplifting immigrant and migrant persons. Resolution 0128 cites the many stories throughout both Testaments where migrants crossed borders freely or fled harm. Stories such as Abraham and Sara leaving their homeland (Gen. 12), Moses leading the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land (Ex. 13–14), and Mary and Joseph fleeing the threats against Jesus’ life (Matt. 2:13–15) provide a biblical foundation that acknowledges that migration is not only a part of the reality of the biblical world, it also—theologically speaking—is employed as part of God’s divine’s story. The Resolution also cited Exodus 23:9, among others, which reminds the community of Israel not to oppress an “alien” since they themselves were strangers in a foreign land. These biblical references were echoed in Resolution 0729, “Faith and Our New

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<sup>34</sup> The DOC numbers its resolutions in a specific manner. The first two digits indicate the year in which the resolution was adopted and the second to numbers indicate the listing of the resolution as it was presented to the Assembly. Therefore, Resolution 0128 was the 28<sup>th</sup> resolution presented in 2001.

<sup>35</sup> Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), “0128-- Calling for the Support of Humane Borders and the Change of United States/Mexico Border Policies,” accessed June 2, 2020, <https://www.discipleshomemissions.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/0128-CallingForTheSupportOfHumaneBordersAndTheChangeOfUS-MexicoBorderPolicies.pdf>.

<sup>36</sup> James Sterngold, “Devastating Picture of Immigrants Dead in Arizona Desert,” *The New York Times*, May 25, 2001, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/05/25/us/devastating-picture-of-immigrants-dead-in-arizona-desert.html>.

<sup>37</sup> Humane Borders/ Fronteras Compasivas, “Humane Borders,” Humane Borders Water Stations, accessed June 3, 2020, <https://www.humaneborders.org/>.



Neighbors,” which reminded the denomination of its biblical mandate to serve the other and provide hospitality for those in need. It called for the local congregations to embrace relationships with immigrant communities as well as provide for the needs “of our immigrant neighbors in the areas of food, clothing, housing, healthcare, education, employment, legal assistance, and refuge.”<sup>38</sup>

The DOC continues to support the Refugee and Immigrant Ministries (RIM), a denominational ministry. Although the church may not have an “official” stated doctrinal position on immigration, the church’s resolutions on the matter have called the members of the denomination to at least consider the immigrant’s stories as well as their pain in traveling, their needs when they arrive in their city, and how the policies of the local, state and federal governments may potentially be causing undue harm and needless prejudice. RIM continues to monitor how all levels of the government’s policies and actions can have an indirect or direct effect on all immigrant communities (not just those coming to the United States from the Southern US border). It is through this lens that they invite all followers of Christ to consider ministry opportunities and theological positions that see immigrants as humans—made in the image of God.

In relationship to the DOC’s commitment to the biblical mandate to recognize the dignity of migrants, the DOC community also has to wrestle with one of its founding tenets: “Freedom of Belief.” This tenant can sometimes cause strife and division not just nationally but within the local congregation. Freedom of belief recognizes that all followers of Christ view, interpret, react to, and implement the teachings of the holy scriptures in different ways. The church understands

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<sup>38</sup> Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), “0729-- Faith and Our New Neighbors,” accessed June 2, 2020, <https://www.discipleshomemissions.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/0729-FaithAndOurNewNeighbors.pdf>.

that people view God and Christ in myriad ways, given their understanding of who God is, why Christ came to Earth, and the inspiration of scripture, to name a few. All these views merge into a person's theological framework. Freedom of belief allows for questioning, growing, and discussion within the local congregation, but it does not mean that all viewpoints are deemed valid or acceptable. There are limits on how far a theology can be stretched. If a theological viewpoint, for example, causes pain, injury, or evil, then it cannot be accepted by the church community. The DOC prides itself on being open and inclusive theologically but at times can take stances that push away certain theological ideologies. This leaves the denomination in a theological quandary. If something is viewed as the "right" thing to do or stand up for, but it goes against others' interpretation of scriptures, then what is the denomination to do?

The Disciples of Christ has good intentions with their resolutions as well as their immigration and refugee ministries. Unfortunately, local churches often do not know that the General Office has had these ministries in place for decades. Thus, when a resolution comes before the General Assembly regarding undocumented workers or border security, it is meant to enhance and support the work that is already being done, but it is seen as "liberalizing" the denomination or "agenda-pushing" or sensationalizing the issue. While it is hard to articulate clearly and succinctly, the DOC needs to clarify their positions or provide more educational/learning opportunities if they want to pursue this issue further and have a wider reach and greater audience. Many congregations in the DOC will not want to feel as if the national office is removing their local church autonomy regarding congregational composition and theological outlook. If the DOC wants to pursue more progressive theological viewpoints and postulations, it will need to weigh how those claims and stances will be heard not just in the General Assemblies and/or General Board meetings but across the denomination. This is not a

call for inaction, rather, it is a call to come together in unity as DOC profess regarding their theology of openness and the openness of the communion table.

The openness of theological thought within the denomination has led to some congregations and ministers being unsure how to address an issue that arises in communities, the nation, and the world. There is a tension that is found in some congregations that have a mixture of political and theological values and beliefs, much like First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Longview, Texas—my home congregation. This project, thus, aims to be in conversation with theologians and the biblical text to help ministers gauge how ministry can be done with regard to political issues such as immigration. By listening to the stories and experiences of others, a person's worldview is expanded; this is an underlying assumption of this project. Ministers in the DOC are balancing personal beliefs with those that are held by the members of the congregation. Re-hearing biblical stories alongside the voices of others, especially those that are outside of the dominant social culture, will continue to develop our theological thinking. By expanding our vision within the church, a fuller picture of God's realm can be seen and understood. It is navigating through these waters that can be difficult for ministers. Even with freedom of belief, the Disciples of Christ and its ministers are still having problems navigating through politics and religion, as with immigration. This raises important questions. How is a minister's proclamation or teaching affected by the looming knowledge that not all persons in a community see immigration, for example, as a critical or essential issue for the church universal today?

To begin a conversation about immigration in a religious context, a minister will need to be educated on the history of immigration policy in the United States. While this history is complex and changing with each presidential administration, it is vital that ministers be aware of

how the events of the past are affecting the decisions that are being made today regarding migration, asylum status, and immigration. In other words, one possible solution to navigating immigration and faith is looking into the past to see how we (U.S. Christians) arrived where we are today.

## CHAPTER TWO: HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS

The history of immigration in the United States of America begins before the founding of the nation. This chapter aims to examine immigration to the United States from a historical context so that patterns, trends, and why people believe what they do on immigration can be understood today.

With First Christian Church located in Texas, immigration is a frequent topic in the state's history and current state and local news. How this history is presented and whose version of the story is the most pronounced will significantly impact a person's understanding of the history of Texas and immigration. All history, however, is from a given perspective and approach, and some have claimed that "objective" history does not exist if understood along the scientific field.<sup>39</sup> Thus, the history of Texas found in school textbooks might only be part of the picture, which can cause some to view the below-presented history with a "historical skepticism."<sup>40</sup> In hermeneutical terms, this critical posture, which I am taking, of how history is constructed is referred to as a "hermeneutic of suspicion," particularly when reading U.S. history on immigration as well as reading the historical world behind the biblical text. Moreover, a hermeneutics of suspicion posture helps to reveal those "unconscious assumptions" that construct knowledge, inform how we read texts, and reconstruct and reimagine the past.<sup>41</sup>

For instance, the history taught in Texas public schools can omit entire groups' stories, contributions, and experiences since they do not align with the commonly understood

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<sup>39</sup> Joyce Oldham Appleby, Lynn Avery Hunt, and Margaret C. Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History*, 1st ed. (New York: Norton, 1994), 243-245.

<sup>40</sup> Christopher Blake, "Can History be Objective?" *Mind* 64, no. 253 (1955): 61.

<sup>41</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic: The Politics of Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999), 53.

exceptionalism of U.S. American history as unique, superior, and divinely manifested.<sup>42</sup> Texas history has a painful past regarding immigrants, particularly immigrants of Latin American descent (Latinx). Since history is constructed to benefit some people over others, anthropologist Mary Douglas argues that “nations need to control national memory, because nations keep their shape by shaping their citizens’ understanding of the past.”<sup>43</sup> One example in Texas’ history was in the 1850s, when Uvalde County (among others) passed resolutions and laws that prohibited “all Mexicans from traversing the area unless they had in their possession a passport granted by some white authority.”<sup>44</sup> Anglo (those of European descent) settlers viewed Mexicans as immoral and deviant.<sup>45</sup> Crimes were committed against the Mexican/immigrant populations with little or no legal recourse.<sup>46</sup> Elections in areas with large Mexican/Texas-Mexicans populations were met with unfair rules and resolutions because immigrants were perceived as making “no effort to assimilate; they identified customs and causes that were Mexican instead of those of their adopted country.”<sup>47</sup> People also believed that the “Mexicans’” retention of the Spanish language and their supposed refusal to learn English went against the American way of life.<sup>48</sup> Some of these same issues from over 150 years ago are still being discussed with similar arguments being constructed today (i.e., English as the official language of the United States, travel bans, revisionist histories, Latinxs as a public charge, etc.). In other words, as Francisco

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<sup>42</sup> See Greg Grandin, *The End of the Myth: From the Frontier to the Border Wall in the Mind of America* (New York: Metropolitan Books), 2019.

<sup>43</sup> Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History*, 106.

<sup>44</sup> Arnaldo de León, *They Called them Greasers: Anglo Attitudes Toward Mexicans in Texas, 1821-1900* (Austin, Texas: The University of Texas Press, 1983), 53.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

Lozada, Jr. has argued in *Toward a Latino/a Biblical Interpretation*, they (particularly those who have been present in Texas prior to its statehood) are perceived as “visitors” to the country rather than belonging.<sup>49</sup>

By not addressing the root causes of these issues nor understanding this history from multiple points of view, students today are kept distant from understanding this history that is taught to them. In fact, the pictures of the history of Texas and the United States will remain partial and incomplete. Because of this, only certain events, people, and their actions will be highlighted, omitting some of the most controversial parts and significant voices in the history of Texas and the United States.

This historical reframing has been seen in the Southern part of the United States with regard to the removal of Confederate statues and monuments as well as the naming of buildings and schools for Confederate generals and soldiers such as Robert E. Lee. The argument from those not wanting to remove the statues or renaming a school with a confederate leader is that by doing so, the society is “erasing history.” However, keeping the confederate statues and names in place also erases history, albeit not the history of the people from European descent. In other words, by keeping the confederate statues, African American slaves’ stories are not told, heard, or taught in schools. Where are their statutes, their stories, their histories? By excluding their symbolic identities, those injustices that were perpetrated against them fade into the background of US history. These debates about the past demonstrate how injustices centuries ago are still felt by all, particularly by African American populations today. In other words, by keeping confederate symbols in place, the entire (or complete) history of the Civil War or the

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<sup>49</sup> Francisco Lozada, Jr., *Toward a Latino/a Biblical Interpretation* (Resources for Biblical Study, 91; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Press, 2017), 24.

Confederate States has “technically” never been told. There is deep pain and hurt surrounding this moment in US American history. Thus, the entire history or at least a fuller picture must be presented—all points of view must be engaged. This notion is also true with respect to the history of immigration in the United States of America. Additionally, President Donald Trump, during his time in office, had called for a “pro-American curriculum” to be taught and introduced in schools across the nation.<sup>50</sup> He argues that Democrats and those who hold a more liberal political stance have been distorting the history of the United States to undermine the most significant aspects of the nation. Thus, he created the “1776 Commission” to promote a more “patriotic education.” Historians argue, however, that this framing of history is dangerous; “The study of history – the sincere, open, and serious study of history in all its complexity – is dangerous and misleading only if you have something to hide. And it's impossible to understand ourselves as a nation, and to reckon with the roots and implications of our current moment, if we deny the uncomfortable parts of America's past.”<sup>51</sup>

The history of immigration in the United States is a complex one. For the purposes of this study, the major immigration laws, practices, and procedures starting from 1900 to 2020 will be examined. Throughout this time, the laws regarding immigration, immigrant status, and even public opinion regarding immigrants and undocumented workers have changed dramatically. On the base of the Statue of Liberty given to the US in 1886 are the words from the poem “Colossus” -- “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-tossed to me, I lift my

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<sup>50</sup> David Jackson, “Liberal Indoctrination!: Donald Trump Rails against Modern Teaching of U.S. History,” USA Today September 18, 2020, accessed November 7, 2020, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/elections/2020/09/17/donald-trump-slams-modern-teaching-history-liberal-indoctrination/3480885001/>.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.



lamp beside the golden door!”<sup>52</sup> This sentiment of the openness of the United States to immigrants, migrants, and refugees has been reshaped in the last century through various legal policies and procedures, which also influenced (and continues to influence) the view American citizens, including Christians, project onto immigrants.

Recent studies have found that by 2050 minorities (persons who are not of European descent) will comprise half of the United States’ population.<sup>53</sup> Immigration, nevertheless, has become more of a political issue than a human, moral, religious, or ethical issue.<sup>54</sup> Immigrants, themselves, have been lumped together in one homogenous group. Anecdotal claims are made, which leads to misinformation and unnecessary fear. For instance, many people believe that the rate of crime in an immigrant community is higher than the general population; this, however, has been studied numerous times and has been proven false.<sup>55</sup> These claims create more division leading to more divisive and politically charged rhetoric. Politicians and the media use terms such as “‘flood,’ a ‘rising tide,’ or ‘tidal wave,’ a ‘horde,’ or an ‘invasion’” to describe the influx of immigrants, specifically from the Southern border of the United States.<sup>56</sup> These terms frame the way that people view and interact with immigrant populations and lead to stereotypes.<sup>57</sup> For instance, former President Donald J. Trump referred to those trying to come to the United States

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<sup>52</sup> Richard Gribble, *The Immigration Restriction Debate, 1917-1929: Church and State in Conflict*, (2018), 398.

<sup>53</sup> Jenny Yang, "A Christian Perspective on Immigrant Integration," *The Review of Faith & International Affairs: CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVES ON US IMMIGRATION POLICY* 9, no. 1 (2011): 77.

<sup>54</sup> M. Daniel Carroll R., *Christians at the Border: Immigration, the Church, and the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2008), 5.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 27-28.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>57</sup> Maurianne Adams, Lee Anne Bell, and Pat Griffin, *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice*, Third ed. (New York: Routledge, 2016), 154.

to seek asylum as carrying out a “big fat con job.”<sup>58</sup> He, as well as others in his administration, did not believe the stories of the immigrants; they believed those seeking refuge in the United States have ulterior motives. Many Americans believe that those coming to the United States are doing so merely to “live off” of social services provided by the federal and state governments. This notion, however, is false given that undocumented workers do not qualify for any federal assistance programs per United States law.<sup>59</sup>

There is a suspicion that surrounds the issue of immigration. Because of this, policies and laws are put into place to ensure that the “right” people receive the assistance they need. This argument is also heard with respect to undocumented workers and DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) recipients. Some believe that these groups unfairly take away goods and social services from those persons who are proceeding through the immigration system the “right way,” an adage that suggests immigrants need to “get in line” and “wait their turn.” Richard Land of the Southern Baptist Convention’s Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission argues that “a path to legalization must not involve any type of ‘amnesty’ that would just forgive illegal entry, and it must require that those who are in the US illegally be placed behind those who have been trying to come here legally.”<sup>60</sup> The problem with this type of understanding of the immigration system is that it is not as easy as merely filling out a form and receiving protected status. Due to the backlog of immigration cases and the changing immigration laws and procedures, the process to attain status is complicated, often requiring professional legal help,

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<sup>58</sup> Maria Sacchetti, “U.S. Asylum Process Is at the Center of Trump’s Immigration Ire,” *The Washington Post*, April 9, 2019, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/immigration/us-asylum-process-is-at-the-center-of-trumps-immigration-ire/2019/04/09/7f8259b8-5aec-11e9-842d-7d3ed7eb3957\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.c2ce892b1372](https://www.washingtonpost.com/immigration/us-asylum-process-is-at-the-center-of-trumps-immigration-ire/2019/04/09/7f8259b8-5aec-11e9-842d-7d3ed7eb3957_story.html?utm_term=.c2ce892b1372).

<sup>59</sup> Tara Watson, “Do Undocumented Immigrants Overuse Government Benefits?,” *Econofact*, March 28, 2017, <https://econofact.org/do-undocumented-immigrants-overuse-government-benefits>.

<sup>60</sup> Richard Land, “A just, Fair, and Compassionate Immigration Policy,” *The Review of Faith & International Affairs: CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVES ON US IMMIGRATION POLICY* 9, no. 1 (2011): 25.

which can be quite expensive. Even with this help, the process can take many months to several years to be completed. According to the US Citizenship and Immigration Service, a person who is seeking asylum status in the Texas Service Center can expect to wait 19-24.5 months. This is based on if the person filed their asylum claim by June 22, 2018.<sup>61</sup> This complexity is what immigrants face even when their lives might be in danger from their country of origin.

In April 2019, Monmouth University conducted a survey which stated that 46% of respondents believed that those seeking asylum status were “trying to get around the normal [immigration] process.”<sup>62</sup> Now, the term “asylum seeker” has a negative connotation, with many people associating these immigrants with criminality and terrorism.<sup>63</sup> When people on the move are viewed through the lens of criminality, their chance of being seen as humans is minimized. It is easy to dismiss their claims for help and assistance if you do not view their claim as valid. In other words, by dehumanizing the immigrant, it is akin to expunging God out of the person.

### **Defining Immigration**

Immigration, unfortunately, does not have a simple or concise definition. Immigration on a state or federal level is framed at times based on who belongs in a country (citizenship, legal status) and who do not have the right or privilege to belong in a country (non-citizenship). The Federal Government, through its policies, practices, and laws, becomes the sole authority and agency on who can or cannot be admitted into the country. The prevailing thought is that the

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<sup>61</sup> US Citizenship and Immigration Services, “US Citizenship and Immigration Services,” Check Case Processing Times, accessed June 30, 2020, <https://egov.uscis.gov/processing-times/>.

<sup>62</sup> Monmouth University Polling Institute, “Mixed Opinion On Trump’s New Immigration Proposals,” Monmouth University, April 25, 2019, [https://www.monmouth.edu/polling-institute/reports/monmouthpoll\\_us\\_042519/](https://www.monmouth.edu/polling-institute/reports/monmouthpoll_us_042519/).

<sup>63</sup> Fleur S. Houston, *You Shall Love the Stranger as Yourself: The Bible, Refugees and Asylum* (New York, New York; London, [England]: Routledge, 2015), 51.

Government has a right (sovereignty) and obligation to protect its borders and citizens, and one way that is achieved is by controlling and maintaining who comes in and out of the country via ports and border crossings. It has been argued that borders, as commonly understood in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, are modern constructions.<sup>64</sup> Humanity, therefore, has claimed most of the land and resources on the planet; this has led to resource hoarding and restricting the movement of persons across artificially established and drawn borders.<sup>65</sup>

Many people, particularly in the Southern part of the United States, view immigration strictly between Mexico, Central and South America, and the United States. This is a limited view because the United States has laws, rules, and procedures for accepting or denying persons from all over the world. Different people try to come to the United States for various voluntary and involuntary reasons. Some are fleeing persecution based on their religious or political beliefs in their home country, some are looking for employment with better pay and benefits, and others are trying to receive an education from a United States college or university. Some have referred to the movement of immigrants from one country to another country as the “push-pull effect.”<sup>66</sup> The push is the action, condition, policy, or threat that causes someone to leave their country of origin searching for a more hospitable, equitable, or safe place. The pull is found in a receiving country whose needs for basic jobs such as agriculture and construction pull people from the global south by providing them higher wages and safety from violence and persecution within their own countries. Some persons arriving in the United States from Central and South America

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<sup>64</sup> Reece Jones, *Violent Borders: Refugees and the Right to Move* (London: Verso, 2016), 112.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>66</sup> United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Root Causes of Migration,” Justice for Immigrants: We Are One Family Under God, last modified February 14, 2017, <https://justiceforimmigrants.org/what-we-are-working-on/immigration/root-causes-of-migration/>.

come with “little education, limited employment skills, and lack of knowledge of how things function in the United States.”<sup>67</sup> But others do come to the United States with skills and have to de-skill themselves upon arrival because their degrees are not accepted in the United States.<sup>68</sup> Nonetheless, their resilience and creativity are testaments to their wanting to belong in order to provide for their family.

Others, however, argue that this is a simplistic analysis of migration because it focuses on the actions and not on the systems that are driving the migration to take place, such as social and economic development.<sup>69</sup> Some scholars argue that “voluntary” migration or “forced” migration are too binary and not encompassing of the entire picture of the migrant’s experience.<sup>70</sup> The labeling of migrants can be used in a myriad of ways; for example, “a migrant might be someone who is doing migration, who is being a migrant or someone who is being described as a migrant.”<sup>71</sup> Over time, however, terms like “refugee,” “asylum seeker,” and “immigrant” have been used interchangeably. A refugee is defined as “a person who has been forced to leave his or her home on a temporary or permanent basis chiefly because of war or persecution.”<sup>72</sup> According to the United Nations, almost 71 million people have been displaced from their homes and 26 million of them fall into the category of “refugee.” Of the refugees in the world today, half of

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<sup>67</sup> Oscar J. Martínez, *Border People: Life and Society in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1994), 101.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Nicholas Van Hear, Oliver Bakewell, and Katy Long, "Push-Pull Plus: Reconsidering the Drivers of Migration," *Journal of Ethnic & Migration Studies* 44, no. 6 (2018): 929.

<sup>70</sup> Marta Bivand Erdal and Ceri Oeppen, "Forced to Leave? the Discursive and Analytical Significance of Describing Migration as Forced and Voluntary," *Journal of Ethnic & Migration Studies* 44, no. 6 (2018): 982.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 982.

<sup>72</sup> Houston, *You Shall Love the Stranger as Yourself: The Bible, Refugees and Asylum*, 1.

them are under the age of 18.<sup>73</sup> An “asylum seeker” is a person who has arrived at the border or immigration station claiming to be a refugee and has not been granted official status by the receiving country.<sup>74</sup> Finally, an immigrant is someone who has crossed an international border and has settled in a new country.<sup>75</sup> For the purposes of this project, those persons who have come to the United States and have not received their permanent residence status or citizenship or others who do not qualify for certain protections under current immigration law or policies shall be referred to as “undocumented.”<sup>76</sup> Terms such as “illegal” are not helpful and are used to “justify the marginalization of the immigrant population,” which leads to the dehumanization of the individual.<sup>77</sup> If Christians in the church focused less on what people are (status) and more about who they are (person), perhaps the “wall” that creates misunderstanding can disappear.

The United States, with its business practices, regulations, and corporate rules, are sending mixed messages to the United States citizenry and to immigrants. It is as if on the United States border are two signs: one reading “Help Wanted” and another reading “Keep Out.” Part of the US economy is built upon the migrant labor on farms, in manufacturing, construction, childcare, nursing, and landscaping. Because of the “cheap labor,” US Americans are afforded cheaper products like fruits and vegetables. While many US Americans enjoy lower prices, some argue that undocumented workers should not receive federal and state benefits or even be in the

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<sup>73</sup> The UN Refugee Agency, “Figures at a Glance,” UNHCR: The UN Refugee Agency, June 19, 2019, <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html>.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Wherever possible as not to change the meaning or context, terms such as “illegal immigrant” or “illegal alien” shall be changed to “undocumented.”

<sup>77</sup> Yang, *A Christian Perspective on Immigrant Integration*, 78.

United States. US Americans cannot have it both ways; they cannot accept the “fruits” of the undocumented worker’s labor and then demonize the undocumented worker.

The United States has a long history of immigration which, when viewed across the decades, shows how cultural influence, racism, and politics have guided and shaped the stated national immigration policy. By understanding the history of immigration, US Americans (including Christians) today can begin to see how viewpoints and policy actions have been in discussion for many years and at times have been repeated for the same desired outcome of controlling who is in and who is out.

### **History of Immigration in the United States of America (1900-2020)**

Immigration debates are not a new construct for the United States; they have been happening since the Colonial Era.<sup>78</sup> In the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the Supreme Court declared that it was the Federal Government's role to enforce and manage the immigration of persons to the United States. Before this ruling, the task was given to the states to manage and operate. In the case *Chy Lung v. Freeman (1875)*, the Court ruled that “Congress, not the states, was empowered to enact legislation concerning the admission of persons from other nations.”<sup>79</sup> Due to this ruling, the United States Congress began to pass immigration laws and reforms.

Immigration law “serves as a gatekeeper for the nation's border, determining who may enter, how long they may stay, and when they must leave.”<sup>80</sup> This means that the United States of America needed a centralized federal agency to assist with the immigration and possible

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<sup>78</sup> Carroll R., *Christians at the Border: Immigration, the Church, and the Bible*, 5.

<sup>79</sup> Thomas Tandy Lewis, “Chy Lung v. Freeman,” Immigration to the United States, accessed May 28, 2020, <https://immigrationtounitedstates.org/430-chy-lung-v-freeman.html>)

<sup>80</sup> Cornell Law School Legal Information Institute, “Immigration,” accessed May 28, 2020, <https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/immigration>.

deportation of persons. The Immigration Act of 1891 established the first Federal department with the sole authority and aim of “inspecting, admitting, rejecting, and processing all immigrants seeking admission to the United States.”<sup>81</sup> Over time this department has grown and expanded and, as of March 2003, due to the Homeland Security Act of 2002, the US Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS) was created. The act also dismantled the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) as a standalone agency and placed it under the authority of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and Customs and Border Patrol (CBP).<sup>82</sup>

Between 1900 and 1915, 15 million immigrants came to the United States. Due to this high level of immigration and the threat of World War I, the United States Congress passed a bill that was signed into law in 1917 that was the start of limiting immigration to the United States.<sup>83</sup> There was an active “nativism” ethos occurring in the United States during this time period as well, which contributed to seeing any immigrant as not belonging. This notion was “motivated by a variety of factors [and] ideological commitments to white supremacy.”<sup>84</sup> There was also a societal notion that the Protestant European American male was the standard for all other races, genders, and nationalities on Earth.<sup>85</sup> The viewpoint, that a Protestant European male is the standard of society and academia, is one present in many DOC churches, including my own.

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<sup>81</sup> US Citizenship and Immigration Service, “Origins of the Federal Immigration Service,” December 14, 2019, <https://www.uscis.gov/history-and-genealogy/our-history/overview-ins-history/origins-federal-immigration-service>.

<sup>82</sup> US Citizenship and Immigration Service, “Our History,” January 8, 2020, <https://www.uscis.gov/about-us/our-history>.

<sup>83</sup> Department of State (Office of the Historian), “The Immigration Act of 1924 (The Johnson-Reed Act),” Office of the Historian, accessed May 28, 2020, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1921-1936/immigration-act>.

<sup>84</sup> Bob Carter, Marci Green, and Rick Halpern, “Immigration policy and the racialization of migrant labour: The construction of national identities in the USA and Britain,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 19, no. 1 (January 1996): 140, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01419870.1996.9993902>.

<sup>85</sup> Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History*, 135.



Thus, any attempts to stifle this belief was met with a challenge and policy changes to ensure that this viewpoint was still supreme. Many laws restricted the movements and jobs of immigrants from Asia, Mexico, Central, and South America. It was not until many years later that these voices and experiences of women, people of color, and immigrants were heard and included in the American consciousness.<sup>86</sup> On top of that, an anti-Catholic sentiment was beginning to rise in the country as well as “a sense of xenophobia and fear of radical elements, [which,] together with the perception that the country was being overrun by outsiders, turned the minds of many to a more restrictive immigration mentality.”<sup>87</sup> The 1917 Act imposed a large number of restrictions and regulations explicitly aimed at immigrants; for example, the act “implemented a literacy test that required immigrants over 16 years old to demonstrate basic reading comprehension in any language. It also increased the tax paid by new immigrants upon arrival and allowed immigration officials to exercise more discretion in making decisions over whom to exclude.”<sup>88</sup> The prevailing thought was that literacy helped the immigration officers determine who was “fit” or “desirable” (the educated) for entry in the United States.<sup>89</sup>

A significant piece of immigration law was passed in 1924 with the “Immigration Act of 1924,” also known as the Johnson-Reed Act. This act was foundational because it “limited the number of immigrants allowed entry into the United States through a national origins quota.”<sup>90</sup> This was the first time that the United States put numerical limitations on immigration, thus

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>87</sup> Gribble, *The Immigration Restriction Debate, 1917-1929: Church and State in Conflict*, 425.

<sup>88</sup> Department of State, “The Immigration Act of 1924.”

<sup>89</sup> Joseph Nevins, “Operation Gatekeeper: The Rise of the “Illegal Alien” and the Making of the U.S.-Mexico Boundary,” 2002), 101.

<sup>90</sup> Department of State, “The Immigration Act of 1924.”

living into the role as the gatekeeper of the country.<sup>91</sup> The quota system was based on the 1890 census and excluded immigrants from Asia; furthermore, the act stated that only 2 percent of the total number of people of each nationality in the United States (based on the 1890 census) would be eligible for entry. For example, in 1929, the United States set the quota from Germany to 25,957, while the quotas for Afghanistan, Bulgaria, Egypt, Iceland, India, and Spain (as well as several others) were set at 100 immigrants respectively collectively from these countries.<sup>92</sup> Since more German Americans were in the country in 1929, their numbers, of course, would be higher than, say, other countries. This meant that only 100 visas for the entire year would be distributed from these particular countries regardless of need or reason for coming to the United States. The 2 percent threshold for each country's population "emerged in a Report of the Eugenics Committee of the United States Committee on Selective Immigration."

That committee, chaired by none other than Madison Grant and including Congressman Albert Johnson of Washington (the president of the Eugenic Research Association, 1923-1924), argued that a formula based on the 1890 census rather than on a more recent one "would change the character of immigration, and hence of our future population, by bringing about a preponderance of immigration of the stock which originally settled this country." North and West Europeans, read the report, were of "higher intelligence" and hence provided "the best material for American citizenship"<sup>93</sup>

On top of the quota system, a visa fee of ten dollars was imposed as well.<sup>94</sup> According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, \$10 in 1929 is the same as \$150 in 2020. The effects of this act

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<sup>91</sup> While the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act was the first legislation that employed a numerical system for entry into the United States, the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act was the first legislation that based entry on race/ethnicity. See Nevins, *Operation Gatekeeper*, 125-126.

<sup>92</sup> The University of Texas at Austin (Department of History), "Immigration Act of 1924 (Johnson-Reed Act)," Immigration History, accessed May 28, 2020, <https://immigrationhistory.org/item/1924-immigration-act-johnson-reed-act/>.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Nevins, "Operation Gatekeeper," 27.

had a broad reach; the Immigration and Ethnic History Society stated that “this system enabled consular authorities during the 1930s to deny visas to Jews attempting to flee the spread of Nazism in Europe, including the family of Anne Frank.”<sup>95</sup> Mexico, however, was left out of the quota system regulations due to the need for migrant laborers in the United States agricultural industry. From 1900-1930, 685,000 people immigrated from Mexico alone to the United States; this, however, comprised less than four percent of the total of immigrants in that time span.<sup>96</sup> The 1924 Johnson-Reed Act was in place until the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which ended the quota system. This bill laid the foundation for the immigration system that is in place up to the present (2020). It was signed into law by President Johnson at the base of the Statue of Liberty. It provided reforms and removed restrictions on previous immigration laws. For example, as mentioned above, the Johnson-Reed Act was based on a 2% visa issuance based on the 1890 census. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 removed that quota and replaced it with a cap of 170,000 visas per year (with some exceptions), with no one country receiving more than 20,000 per year. Today, it is estimated that over 58 million people were able to immigrate to the United States due to this bill alone.<sup>97</sup>

In the 1950s and 1960s, there was a rising concern in the United States that the Southern border was “out of control.”<sup>98</sup> This led the Eisenhower Administration to implement “Operation Wetback”<sup>99</sup> The term “wetback” is a derogatory slur that has been used in many different

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<sup>95</sup> UT Austin, “Immigration Act of 1924”

<sup>96</sup> Nevins, “Operation Gatekeeper,” 31.

<sup>97</sup> Muzaffar Chishti, Faye Hipsman, and Isabel Ball, “Fifty Years On, the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act Continues to Reshape the United States,” Migration Policy Institute, October 15, 2015, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/fifty-years-1965-immigration-and-nationality-act-continues-reshape-united-states>.

<sup>98</sup> Nevins, “Operation Gatekeeper,” 62.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid. 34.

immigration discussions, particularly when referring to immigration across the Southern US Border. The connotation is that persons coming to the United States must cross the Rio Grande River and become wet while wading through its waters. This operation led to one of the biggest mass deportations in US history, nearly one million people.<sup>100</sup> This came after the United States instituted the “Bracero Program” during World War II. This program allowed laborers from Mexico to work as contract laborers due to the decline in workers because of the war.<sup>101</sup>

The concern of a “threat” from immigrants or migrants from the Southern border has been a topic of political debates, discussions, and policies. And it is a concern that makes its way into the churches in one way or another. Many Presidents have articulated that the Southern US border and the rise of undocumented workers pose a threat to the United States economy as well the “American way of life”—including Christianity—as displayed by many conservative and Evangelical churches today. For example, Former Attorney General Jeff Sessions stated for “to obey the laws of the government because God has ordained them for the purpose of order.” Additionally, White House Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders concurred with Sessions and argued that it is “very biblical to enforce the law.”<sup>102</sup> Other examples include Trump advisor and megachurch minister Paula White arguing that “Jesus could not have broken any immigration laws during his family’s flight to Egypt because Jesus, who was without sin, could

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<sup>100</sup> Eyder Peralta, “It Came Up In The Debate: Here Are 3 Things To Know About 'Operation Wetback',” National Public Radio, November 11, 2015, <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2015/11/11/455613993/it-came-up-in-the-debate-here-are-3-things-to-know-about-operation-wetback>.

<sup>101</sup> Otey M. Scruggs, “Texas and the Bracero Program, 1942-1947,” *Pacific Historical Review* 32, no. 3 (1963): 251.

<sup>102</sup> Lincoln Mullen, “The Fight to Define Romans 13,” *The Atlantic*, June 15, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/06/romans-13/562916/>.

not therefore have broken the law”<sup>103</sup> as well as Robert Jeffress, minister of First Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas, arguing that “God is not an open borders guy [*sic*].”<sup>104</sup>

President Gerald Ford stated that undocumented workers were interfering with the country’s economic prosperity.<sup>105</sup> President Bill Clinton enacted “Operation Gatekeeper,” which aimed to slow the number of undocumented persons coming to the United States. Some have argued that this operation laid the groundwork for immigration systems, structures, and views that are prevalent today.<sup>106</sup>

In recent years, immigration has been given prominence in the United States' civil and political conversations. During the 2016 election, 76% of Republican voters and 62% of Democratic voters stated that immigration was an “important or extremely important” issue.<sup>107</sup> Presidential candidate Jeb Bush said that he would be open to allowing refugees to come to the United States if “they could prove” they were Christians.<sup>108</sup> Many of the presidential hopefuls laid out immigration reforms and policies ranging from an overhaul of the entire system to streamlining the refugee process. Leading up to the 2020 presidential election, immigration was

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<sup>103</sup> Tara Isabella Burton, “Top Trump Evangelical Ally: Jesus Never Broke Immigration Law,” *Vox*, July 11, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/2018/7/11/17561950/trump-evangelical-ally-jesus-immigration-law>.

<sup>104</sup> Harry Farley, “Pastor Robert Jeffress: 'God Is Not an Open Borders Guy',” *Christianity Today*, September 14, 2017, <https://www.christiantoday.com/article/pastor-robert-jeffress-god-is-not-an-open-borders-guy/113701.htm>.

<sup>105</sup> Nevins, *Operation Gatekeeper*, 34.

<sup>106</sup> The World Staff, “Trump's Hard-Line Immigration Policies Build On the History of Former Us Presidents,” *The World*, July 12, 2019, <https://www.pri.org/stories/2019-07-12/trumps-hard-line-immigration-policies-build-history-former-us-presidents>.

<sup>107</sup> Frank Newport, “Democrats, Republicans Agree On Four Top Issues for Campaign,” *Gallup*, February 1, 2016, accessed September 27, 2016, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/188918/democrats-republicans-agree-four-top-issues-campaign.aspx>.

<sup>108</sup> Candace Smith, “Jeb Bush Says Us Should Allow Syrian Refugees Who Can Prove They're Christian: Presidential Hopeful Jeb Bush Said the Us Should Allow Some Refugees from Syria,” *ABC News*, November 15, 2017, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/jeb-bush-us-syrian-refugees-prove-christian/story?id=35263074>.

a topic of debates and political ads; both presidential candidates (really one) from the two major parties laid out two different plans and aims for immigration reform, asylum claims, and family separation. Ironically, in 2020 immigration took a back seat to the COVID-19 pandemic among voters; polling shows that the economy and the response to the pandemic were of importance in deciding who to support in the 2020 election.<sup>109</sup>

The two main political parties in the United States hold different views on immigration. The Republican party (also known as the GOP or Grand Old Party) has an eleven-point “Principles of American Renewal.” One of the principles focuses on immigration and states; “We need an immigration system that secures our borders, upholds the law, and boosts our economy.”<sup>110</sup> Conversely, the Democratic Party platform says that “Democrats believe immigration is not just a problem to be solved; it is a defining aspect of the American character and our shared history.”<sup>111</sup> The Democratic party has been working for immigration reform, citing that the system is broken, ineffective. The Republican party, however, believes that the issue of immigration is more centered on the legal aspects and punishing those who do not comply with the established laws and policies of the United States.

This has been a centerpiece issue in presidential elections for many years. For example, the Democratic Party Presidential nominee in 2016, Hillary R. Clinton, called for comprehensive immigration reform and wanted to have a bill with a pathway for citizenship sent to Congress for

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<sup>109</sup> Lauren Chadwick, “US Election: What Are Five Big Issues That Americans Care About?,” *Euronews*, November 3, 2020, <https://www.euronews.com/2020/11/03/us-election-what-are-five-big-issues-that-americans-care-about>.

<sup>110</sup> Republican National Committee, “Principles for American Renewal,” The Republican National Committee (GOP), accessed June 29, 2020, <https://www.gop.com/principles-for-american-renewal>.

<sup>111</sup> Democratic National Committee, “Immigration Reform,” The Democratic National Committee, accessed June 29, 2020, <https://democrats.org/where-we-stand/the-issues/immigration-reform/>.

consideration within the first 100 days after taking office. Additionally, Clinton’s plan called for the ending of private detention centers and expanding health care through the Affordable Care Act to all persons regardless of their immigration status.<sup>112</sup> The Republican candidate, Donald J. Trump, proposed the building of a wall along the Southern border of the United States, tripling the number of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents, and reforming “legal immigration to serve the best interests of America and its workers, keeping immigration levels within historic norms.”<sup>113</sup> Trump proposed that through taxes and trade deals the country of Mexico would “pay for the wall.”<sup>114</sup>

These differences between the two parties are not a new phenomenon; however, the divides concerning immigration between these two parties is reflected at the state level too.<sup>115</sup> In Texas, this divide was shown prominently during the 2018 US Senate race between Representative Beto O’Rourke and incumbent Senator Ted Cruz. When asked about immigration, Cruz summed up his policy position in four words: “legal good, illegal bad.”<sup>116</sup> O’Rourke focused more on immigrants who were trying to navigate the system, Deferred Action

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<sup>112</sup> Hilary R. Clinton For President 2016, “Immigration Reform,” accessed October 31, 2016, <https://www.hillaryclinton.com/issues/immigration-reform/>.

<sup>113</sup> Donald J. Trump, “Immigration,” accessed October 31, 2016, <https://www.donaldjtrump.com/policies/immigration>.

<sup>114</sup> Veronica Stracqualursi and Ryan Browne, “Mexico still isn’t paying for the wall. But here’s where the money is coming from,” *CNN*, September 6, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/09/06/politics/military-projects-border-wall/index.html>.

<sup>115</sup> Andrew Daniller, “Americans’ Immigration Policy Priorities: Divisions between – and Within – the Two Parties,” Pew Research Center, November 12, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/11/12/americans-immigration-policy-priorities-divisions-between-and-within-the-two-parties/>.

<sup>116</sup> Todd J. Gillman and Robert T. Garrett, “Testy Ted Cruz-Beto O’Rourke Debate Punctuated by Clashes On Immigrants, Kavanaugh, NFL Protests,” *The Dallas Morning News*, September 21, 2018, <https://www.dallasnews.com/news/2018/09/22/testy-ted-cruz-beto-orourke-debate-punctuated-by-clashes-on-immigrants-kavanaugh-nfl-protests/>.

for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), and the appropriation of funds for a barrier on the Southern US Border.<sup>117</sup>

Building a wall along the border of Mexico and the United States was not a new idea for the United States. President George W. Bush authorized the building of a barrier on the USA/Mexico border in 2006; it would start in San Diego, California, and extend for hundreds of miles.<sup>118</sup> In addition to the barrier being built, the act authorized more vehicle checks at the Southern US Border and the use of aerial surveillance to monitor migrants coming into the country without proper documentation. President Bush stated that this act was a step towards “immigration reform,” which Congress has tried to enact for many years without success. As part of this bill, the Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security waived 37 different laws and acts so that the barrier could be constructed. Some of those acts included “the Endangered Species Act, the Clean Water Act, the Clean Air Act, the National Environmental Policy Act, the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, the Wilderness Act, the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, and the Antiquities Act.”<sup>119</sup>

In response to the passage of the Secure Fence Act, the Bush Administration reaffirmed their belief that America was a “melting pot” where “traditions were honored and appreciated.” They continued by stating that “Americans are bound together by our shared ideals, an appreciation of our history, respect for the flag we fly, and an ability to speak and write the English language. When immigrants assimilate and advance in our society, they realize their

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Office of the Press Secretary (White House), “Fact Sheet: The Secure Fence Act of 2006,” The White House (George W. Bush), October 26, 2006, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2006/10/20061026-1.html>.

<sup>119</sup> Jones, *Violent Borders: Refugees and the Right to Move*, 141-142.



dreams, renew our spirit, and add to the unity of America.”<sup>120</sup> In other words, the Bush administration believed that to be a “[US] American” is contingent on assimilating to the “[US] America culture” and learning English while arguing that America is a melting pot of cultures and ideas. This is consistent with some idealistic views of immigrants coming to the United States, particularly in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Most of the assimilation was not voluntary, given that some communities would not hire, rent, or loan to immigrant communities unless they only spoke English and removed their native homeland cultures and practices from their way of being.<sup>121</sup> At the National Catholic Prayer Breakfast, President Bush stated, “An immigration system that forces people into the shadows of our society, or leaves them prey to criminals, is a system that needs to be changed. I am confident that we can change--- change our immigration system in a way that secures our border, respects the rule of law, and, as importantly, upholds the decency of our country.”<sup>122</sup>

President Barack H. Obama was elected in November 2008 and 2012. During his presidency, he focused on the immigration system, specifically on children who were brought to this country by their parents who might be undocumented. President Obama understood immigration and the struggle of immigrants in this way: “We define ourselves as a nation of immigrants. That’s who we are — in our bones. The promise we see in those who come here from every corner of the globe that’s always been one of our greatest strengths. It keeps our workforce young. It keeps our country on the cutting edge. And it’s helped build the greatest

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<sup>120</sup> Office of the Press Secretary, Fact Sheet.

<sup>121</sup> Yang, *A Christian Perspective on Immigrant Integration*, 82.

<sup>122</sup> Melkonian-Hoover, *The Politics of Religion and Immigration*, 31.

economic engine the world has ever known.”<sup>123</sup> These ideas served as a guiding framework for his approach to trying to serve the immigrant population. During his tenure, he was met with opposition specifically from the Republican Party leaders in the Senate.<sup>124</sup>

Because of the political opposition, the Obama administration, by executive order, created the DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) program. Under this program, persons who were brought to the United States as children and were under the age of 31 by June 15, 2012, were not subject to deportation; they had to apply for DACA status and renew it every two years.<sup>125</sup> While this was not a complete overhaul or fix to the immigration system, it did provide protection for almost a million undocumented persons. Those who were protected by this program were referred to as “Dreamers.” Senate Republicans expressly argued that President Obama overreached in his authority by executing this order.<sup>126</sup>

In March 2017, the Trump Administration announced that the DACA program would end. They argued that the “rule of law” needed to be enforced and that the program was a constitutional overreach from the Obama Administration. Former Attorney General Jeff Sessions stated that the phasing out of DACA gave Congress time to enact immigration reforms. Congress, however, did not pass any immigration reform bills before the expiry date of DACA. The ending of the DACA program was met with legal challenges, eventually making its way to the Supreme Court of the United States. In June 2020, the Supreme Court, in a 5-4 decision,

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<sup>123</sup> President Barack Obama's White House Archives, “Fixing the System President Obama Is Taking Action On Immigration,” President Barack Obama's White House Archive, accessed June 29, 2020, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/issues/immigration/immigration-action>.

<sup>124</sup> Susan Cornwell, “Senate Democrats Again Block Bill Derailing Obama On Immigration,” Reuters, February 5, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-congress-immigration/senate-democrats-again-block-bill-derailing-obama-on-immigration-idUSKBN0L81Q320150204>.

<sup>125</sup> Nolan G. Pope, *The Effects of DACAmentation: The Impact of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals on Unauthorized Immigrants*, 2016), 2.

<sup>126</sup> Cornwell, “Senate Democrats Again Block Bill Derailing Obama On Immigration,”

ruled that the Trump Administration could not end the DACA program<sup>127</sup> due to a violation of the Administrative Procedure Act.<sup>128</sup> Due to this ruling, over 650,000 people would be able to retain their immigration status in the United States and not be deported. Shortly after the announcement of the decision, the Trump Administration stated that they would consider the ruling of the Supreme Court and will look for avenues to end DACA in the future.

President Donald J. Trump was elected in November 2016 and made immigration a key piece of his administration's aims and policy decision-making. Days after being inaugurated, Trump signed two Executive Orders regarding immigration. One order removed federal funding from "sanctuary cities" or cities that have decided not to prosecute undocumented workers and residents despite US Federal Immigration law.<sup>129</sup> The second order authorized "federal funding to the construction of a wall along the Mexico-U.S. border."<sup>130</sup> Two days after these orders, President Trump signed an Executive Order entitled "Protecting the Nation From Foreign Terrorist Entry Into the United States,"<sup>131</sup> also known as the "Muslim and Refugee Travel Ban."<sup>132</sup> This particular order issued "'temporary suspensions of entry' for all refugees, regardless of nationality, and foreign nationals from seven Muslim-majority countries. In

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<sup>127</sup> Pete Williams, "Supreme Court rules Trump cannot end DACA in big win for 'Dreamer' legal immigrants," *NBC News*, accessed June 18, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/supreme-court/supreme-court-rules-trump-cannot-end-daca-big-win-dreamer-n1115116>.

<sup>128</sup> Elise Foley, "Supreme Court Rules Trump Wrongly Ended Daca, Leaves Program in Place," *The Huffington Post*, June 18, 2020, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/supreme-court-leaves-daca-in-place-dreamers\\_n\\_5ea1ad75c5b6f5350a34cec5](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/supreme-court-leaves-daca-in-place-dreamers_n_5ea1ad75c5b6f5350a34cec5).

<sup>129</sup> Kristina Cooke and Ted Hesson, "What Are 'sanctuary' Cities and Why Is Trump Targeting Them?," *Reuters*, February 25, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-immigration-crime/what-are-sanctuary-cities-and-why-is-trump-targeting-them-idUSKBN20J25R>.

<sup>130</sup> Avalon Zoppo, Amanda Proença Santos, and Jackson Hudgins, "Here's the Full List of Donald Trump's Executive Orders," *NBC News*, October 17, 2017, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/white-house/here-s-full-list-donald-trump-s-executive-orders-n720796>.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>132</sup> Arab American Institute, "The Muslim and Refugee Ban," accessed May 28, 2020, [https://www.aaiusa.org/the\\_muslim\\_and\\_refugee\\_ban](https://www.aaiusa.org/the_muslim_and_refugee_ban).

addition to an indefinite ban of Syrian refugees, the order required federal agencies to ‘implement uniform screening standards for all immigration programs,’ that would include ‘a database of identity documents’ and ‘a mechanism to assess ... intent to commit criminal or terrorist acts after entering the United States.’”<sup>133</sup> The order also reduced the number of refugees admitted to the United States from 110,000 per year to 50,000.<sup>134</sup> Throughout the Trump Presidency, the number of refugees admitted has continued to drop. In 2019, the number of refugees admitted into the United States was set at 18,000 for the year; the 18,000 was broken down into “4,000 refugee slots for Iraqis who worked with the United States military, 1,500 for people from Central America, and 5,000 for people persecuted for their religion.”<sup>135</sup> The additional 7,500 slots are for those who are seeking family unification and have been cleared for resettlement.

In 2018, 51% of Americans believed that the United States “has a responsibility to accept refugees into the country,” while 43% believed they did not.<sup>136</sup> There is undoubtedly a divide between persons who affiliate with the Republican and Democrat political stances. For example, 74% of Democrats argue that the United States needs to accept refugees; this is three times as much as Republicans who have the same response.<sup>137</sup> Another study found that over 60% of

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Center for Migration Studies, “” President Trump’s Executive Orders on Immigration and Refugees, accessed May 28, 2020, <https://cmsny.org/trumps-executive-orders-immigration-refugees/>.

<sup>135</sup> Michael D. Shear and Zolan Kanno-Youngs, “Trump Slashes Refugee Cap to 18,000, Curtailing U.S. Role as Haven,” *The New York Times*, September 26, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/26/us/politics/trump-refugees.html>.

<sup>136</sup> Hannah Hartig, “Republicans Turn More Negative Toward Refugees as Number Admitted to U.S. Plummet,” Pew Research Center, May 24, 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/05/24/republicans-turn-more-negative-toward-refugees-as-number-admitted-to-u-s-plummet/>.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

Americans believe that the acceptance of immigrants and refugees is “essential to who we are as a nation.”<sup>138</sup>

In February 2019, after Congress failed to approve federal dollars for the construction of a barrier on the Southern US border in the annual federal budget, President Trump declared a national emergency and authorized the appropriation of federal funds for construction. In the declaration, President Trump defended his actions by arguing that “the flow of drugs, criminals and illegal immigrants from Mexico constituted a profound threat to national security that justified unilateral action.”<sup>139</sup> This declaration was met with legal challenges from multiple states. In December 2019, a federal judge ruled that the President could not use funds allocated for the Pentagon (Department of Defense) to construct the barrier.<sup>140</sup> In October 2020, the Supreme Court of the United States announced that they would hear arguments in order to make a final ruling regarding the national emergency and funding for the border wall.<sup>141</sup>

Currently, at the Southern US Border, there are about 650 miles of barriers in various forms: walls, pedestrian, and vehicle.<sup>142</sup> It is estimated that a barrier will cost the United States \$30 million per mile.<sup>143</sup> The border wall has been a source of debate in the country. Some groups

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<sup>138</sup> Claire Brockway and Carroll Doherty, “Growing Share of Republicans Say u.s. Risks Losing Its Identity If It Is Too Open to Foreigners,” Pew Research Center, July 17, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/07/17/growing-share-of-republicans-say-u-s-risks-losing-its-identity-if-it-is-too-open-to-foreigners/>.

<sup>139</sup> Peter Baker, “Trump Declares a National Emergency, and Provokes a Constitutional Clash,” *The New York Times*, February 15, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/15/us/politics/national-emergency-trump.html>.

<sup>140</sup> Richard Gonzales and Ryan Browne, “2nd Federal Judge Blocks Plan to Use Pentagon Funds for Border Wall,” National Public Radio, December 11, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/12/11/787284972/second-federal-judge-blocks-plan-to-use-pentagon-funds-for-border-wall>.

<sup>141</sup> Priscilla Alvarez, “Supreme Court to Hear Challenges to Trump Border Wall Funding and Asylum Policies,” *CNN*, October 19, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/10/19/politics/supreme-court-immigration-border-wall-asylum/index.html>.

<sup>142</sup> Nick Miroff and Adrian Blanco, “Trump Ramps up Border-Wall Construction Ahead of 2020 Vote,” *The Washington Post*, February 6, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/national/immigration/border-wall-progress/>.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

view it has a necessary tool to continue to strengthen the United States, and others see it as another device used to promote injustice and racism. Reece Jones writes that “the hardening of the US-Mexico border has resulted in both direct and structurally violent outcomes for migrants; as the easiest crossing points are closed, migrants choose to put their lives in the hands of smugglers in order to take ever more dangerous routes across the border.”<sup>144</sup>

In March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared that the effects of the COVID-19 (Corona Virus) outbreak were officially a global pandemic.<sup>145</sup> While millions of people worldwide were getting infected, this pandemic had a direct effect on immigration policy and practices in the United States. In April 2020, President Trump ordered that all immigration be halted to stop the spread of the disease. The number of immigrants entering the country and the number of visas issued by the State Department dropped 95% between February 2020 and April 2020.<sup>146</sup> Also, some undocumented workers whose jobs were in the house cleaning and service industry were left without jobs. In other words, during the pandemic in the United States, many people could not afford or did not want their homes to be cleaned or maintained, leaving many undocumented workers without incomes and protections.<sup>147</sup> Additionally, the Trump Administration approved a financial stimulus bill (the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act), which gave most American adults \$1200 and \$600 per child in their household. There were stipulations regarding who could receive the stimulus money and how

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<sup>144</sup> Jones, *Violent Borders: Refugees and the Right to Move*, 32.

<sup>145</sup> Jamie Ducharme, “World Health Organization Declares Covid-19 a ‘pandemic.’ Here’s What That Means,” *Time Magazine*, March 11, 2020, <https://time.com/5791661/who-coronavirus-pandemic-declaration/>.

<sup>146</sup> Alexander Panetta, “Pandemic Slowed U.S. Immigration to a Trickle Before Trump Ordered a Freeze,” *CBC News*, May 29, 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/trump-immigration-coronavirus-pandemic-1.5586472>.

<sup>147</sup> Miriam Jordan and Caitlin Dickerson, “‘PLZ Cancel Our Cleaning’: Virus Leads Many to Cast Aside Household Help,” *The New York Times*, March 25, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/25/us/coronavirus-housekeepers-nannies-domestic-undocumented-immigrants.html>.

much a person or family could receive was based on adjusted gross income. Moreover, the bill stated that United States citizens who are married to immigrants without a Social Security Number would not be eligible to receive the CARES funds.<sup>148</sup> It is estimated that over 4 million people would not receive financial assistance due to not having a Social Security Number even though they work and pay taxes in the United States.<sup>149</sup>

In November 2020, the United States held its presidential election. President Donald J. Trump ran for re-election and his main challenger was Democratic nominee Former Vice President Joseph Biden. Biden's plan for addressing the nation's immigration policy is different than the stated policies of the Trump administration. The Biden plan for immigration is quite extensive and calls for many actions to be taken within the first 100 days in office. For example, if elected President, Biden's plan for modernizing the immigration system would create a pathway to citizenship for 11 million undocumented workers in the United States by removing the public charge rule as well as ending "the Trump Administration's cruel and senseless policies that separate parents from their children at [the US] border."<sup>150</sup> This plan would reverse many of the actions implemented in the Trump administration. Additionally, Biden has stated that he would stop the construction of the border wall and end deportations of those who are undocumented.<sup>151</sup> On November 7, 2020, Joseph Biden was declared the winner of the 2020

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<sup>148</sup> Jerry Jarvie, "These U.S. Citizens Won't Get Coronavirus Stimulus Checks — Because Their Spouses Are Immigrants," *The Los Angeles Times*, April 20, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2020-04-20/u-s-citizens-coronavirus-stimulus-checks-spouses-immigrants>.

<sup>149</sup> Astrid Galvan, Phillip Marcelo, and Claudia Torrens, "Millions of Taxpaying Immigrants Won't Get Stimulus Checks," *The Washington Times*, April 12, 2020, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2020/apr/12/millions-of-tax-paying-immigrants-wont-get-stimulu/>.

<sup>150</sup> Biden/Harris Presidential Campaign, "The Biden Plan for Securing Our Values as a Nation of Immigrants," Biden/Harris Presidential Campaign, accessed November 1, 2020, <https://joebiden.com/immigration/#>.

<sup>151</sup> Elena Moore, "Trump's and Biden's Plans On Immigration," National Public Radio, October 16, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/10/16/919258401/trumps-and-biden-s-plans-on-immigration>.

presidential election,<sup>152</sup> although President Donald Trump has refused to accept the results.<sup>153</sup>

This change in leadership in the White House will be a signal to immigrants and those under the DACA program that changes could potentially be coming.

The policy and practices of immigration in the United States are complex and change due to which party controls the House of Representatives, Senate, or the White House. Given this complexity, it is hard for persons seeking immigration status to navigate the system as well as policy and lawmakers to streamline the process. There are dozens of visas, each with its own requirements. It is a challenging program to navigate especially if you are poor and do not speak the dominant language of the United States. The more the issue of immigration becomes a political tool to keep power or for re-election campaigns, the longer it will be until real, comprehensive immigration reform takes place in the United States. For sure, these issues and disparate national and state views on immigration are not immune from the discussions and views of theology in the churches. They carry over into the churches and at many times are used as a lens to read the scripture and to do theology. By not understanding the history of immigration or by avoiding to address, name, or examine one's theological positions or understandings of immigration, a minister can contribute to the dehumanization that many immigrants face in the United States. A careful, thoughtful, reasoned examination of the history is crucial to understand when bringing it to bear in the churches. More importantly, a theology of immigration, informed by history and tradition, is needed today to ensure that the faith that is proclaimed in pulpits and in Bible studies reflects the heart of Christianity and God. In other

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<sup>152</sup> It is understood that per the US Constitution, the election of the President is not official under the voting of the electors in the Electoral College. The electors vote on the Monday after the second Wednesday in December of the presidential election.

<sup>153</sup> Kevin Breuninger, "Trump Refuses to Accept Election Results, Says It's 'far from Over'," *CNBC*, November 7, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/11/07/trump-refuses-to-accept-election-results-says-it-is-far-from-over.html>.



words, a theology of immigration is needed to inform the church, which I turn to next in this discussion.

## CHAPTER THREE: AN ECCLESIAL-THEOLOGICAL EXAMINATION OF IMMIGRATION

### **Current Context Within the United States Church**

Being a Christian minister frames my worldview. Given the complexity of theology, it is essential that ministers have a basic understanding of how different Christian denominations and theologians view, understand, and interpret the Bible regarding immigration. This knowledge will help the minister to begin their own theological constructing and deconstructing around immigration. Just as important, it will assist them in leading a congregation or Christian community navigating the issues of politics (immigration) and religion (theology).

The United States' society today is becoming more connected via the internet and social media as an effect of globalization. As seen in the 2016 and 2020 Presidential election, it can be challenging to identify “fake news” or propaganda from news that is rigorously investigated by journalists and vetted by editors. More people are turning to social media “sources” and information that comport with their own political or theological belief systems rather than taking a comparative approach to studying an issue.<sup>154</sup> Politics is becoming the new religion. In other words, politics and the advancement of political ideas or values are holding a strong place and prominence in society more so than religion. While politics and religion are two different things, the way that they are used (and sometime misused) speaks to the level of significance and reverence attributed to them in potentially shaping the US social sphere and culture. Today, the

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<sup>154</sup> Walter Veit, “3 Reasons for the Rise of Fake News: Cailin O'Connor explains reasons for the shift in American politics.,” *Psychology Today*, April 17, 2019, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/science-and-philosophy/201904/3-reasons-the-rise-fake-news>.

goals and aims of political parties and groups have supplanted in some ways this cultural standing of the Church in society. There has been a connection between politics and faith throughout US Christian history. There has not always been a delineation between the two groups; “Quakers played a central role in abolition [of slavery], evangelical churches fueled temperance efforts and moral reform, mainline Protestant churches were foundational to the antiwar movement of the 1960s, and the black church generated important resources in the Civil Rights movement.”<sup>155</sup>

Thus, local congregations are not immune to “confirmation or myside bias.”<sup>156</sup> With this bias in a local congregation theological norms, structures, and proclamations are only going to reinforce that which confirms the person or community’s deeply held beliefs. Thus, Christians, like all of humanity, have “a tendency toward confirmation bias, by which we give greater credence to evidence that supports our existing beliefs, and we discount contradictory voices.”<sup>157</sup> Confirmation bias, therefore, inhibits learning and growing within a Christian community.

Some ministers are finding it difficult to articulate a position regarding a topic in society (immigration, abortion, war, poverty, race relations, etc.) without it being heard in a “political” way. Journalist Tom Gjelten wrote a piece for National Public Radio (NPR) outlining how a Presbyterian congregation in North Carolina has been handling being a “purple congregation.” The Senior Minister of the church stated, “people are coming to our churches with their political ideas already formed. That puts pastors in a precarious place because when you speak against that, given the options for people to practice their Christian faith, they will simply go and find a

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<sup>155</sup> Greenberg, “The Church and the Revitalization of Politics and Community,” 379.

<sup>156</sup> Kolbert, “Why Facts Don’t Change Our Minds.”

<sup>157</sup> William Badke, “Fake News, Confirmation Bias, the Search for Truth, and the Theology Student,” *Theological Librarianship* 11, no. 2 (November): 5.

place where the pastor will agree with them.”<sup>158</sup> Thus a clash occurs between one’s personal engrained faith and their political affiliations, beliefs, and stances. These two entities (faith and politics) construct for a person a particular worldview that has the potential to frame how a person acts, reacts, and stands up for others. This worldview is brought into a fuller view, specifically during a presidential election.

Given that the world is becoming more connected and “opinionated”—as reflected in the 2020 Presidency—and it continues to grow more divided and heated, some ministers are finding themselves in the middle of a conflict within their congregations. Given the decline of church attendance across the United States, ministers are becoming more aware or cautious of what they say and how it might be heard or believed within their congregation. This can be a problem because young adults (ages 18-29) are looking for a community to share and act on their beliefs, particularly around the notion of social justice, equity, and compassion. If churches are “closed” to dialogue about an issue, “young people often look elsewhere for more palatable conversations about issues that matter most to them.”<sup>159</sup> On the other hand, some members want to keep the realms of politics and religiosity separate. Politics and religion do not mix. Having both of these positions in a congregation can leave a minister unsure of how to navigate politics and religion.

Traditionally, theologies and the Bible are sources used to advocate for or against a position. For instance, with regards to the stories in the biblical text, one could turn to Romans 13:1–2 to support the view that all migrants should adhere to the laws of a government since

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<sup>158</sup> Tom Gjelten, “Pastoring a Purple Church: ‘I Absolutely Bite My Tongue Sometimes,’” National Public Radio, April 6, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/04/06/703356844/pastoring-a-purple-church-i-absolutely-bite-my-tongue-sometimes>.

<sup>159</sup> Kara Eckmann Powell, *Growing Young: Six Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2016), 245.

governments (in this case, the United States) are ordained by God (as believed through the notion of Manifest Destiny). The Bible is employed or read, therefore, as supporting anti-immigration policies. At the same time, the Bible reveals a story of a people on the move (or migration) and encompasses the process of unsettlement, journey, and resettlement, along with hospitality themes, thus supporting pro-migration policies. This tension (although minimal), within a sacred text, is real and needs to be engaged. The Church universal turns to the Bible as the source of God's interaction with the world: God's response to the community and/or God's guide on what it means to live a faithful life. These stories contained within the sacred pages need to be examined and analyzed. Followers of Christ must find meaningful ways to implement biblical teachings with regard to immigration. It is in the interpretation and implementation of these texts—as a starting point—that the Church then can appropriately respond to the needs of the immigrant community and establish a faithful witness and response through preaching and worship. Therefore, a theology of immigration and its influence on society's laws, policies, and procedures is an important area to explore and define. For just as immigration is not a binary issue, theological viewpoints and expressions regarding immigration and migration are not either; they are multifaceted.

Both politics and religious beliefs are deeply personal and influence the way a person lives their life as well as policies that are enacted and enforced. These decisions have the potential to affect many people at one time. The line between politics and religious beliefs are becoming more blurred, which has been argued is not healthy or constructive for either belief system.<sup>160</sup> Having a theological discussion, therefore, regarding immigration is directly speaking

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<sup>160</sup> Prentiss Smith, "Mixing Politics and Religion Is Not a Good Thing," *The Shreveport Times*, December 31, 2017, <https://www.shreveporttimes.com/story/opinion/columnists/2017/12/31/mixing-politics-and-religion-not-good-thing/984555001/>.

to the values and norms of American society, which “wield power because most people behave in accordance with social norms without being told or forced to do so and judge harshly those who behave otherwise.”<sup>161</sup> Immigration should not be debated, discussed, or analyzed in the abstract. At the heart of immigration are immigrants who are human beings, created in the image of God.<sup>162</sup> Laws, statutes, policies, and procedures centering on immigration have an effect on humanity, directly or indirectly. They are informed by ethical principles that emanate out of the biblical text. Thus, these items need to be pressed upon (or kept in check) from a theological perspective—to keep the laws, statutes, policies, and procedures focused on the humanity of migrants.

### **Interpretational Limits and Guiding Postulates**

A person is born into a context, culture, and society that “shapes and forms who we are; it was constructed before we were born.”<sup>163</sup> There is an ingrained history that everyone lives and participates in, which informs one's position, perspective, and outlook regarding a myriad of topics and social issues. This applies to the issue of immigration. To fully understand one's position on immigration, the role and function of status, power, and privilege, and understanding immigration history needs to be examined thoroughly. By being open and honest about the past, it can help people to examine deeply held beliefs and theologies that once were seen as being precise. For example, there was a common belief that Americans all held the same history and

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<sup>161</sup> Adams, Bell, and Griffin, *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice*, 107.

<sup>162</sup> Carroll R., *Christians at the Border: Immigration, the Church, and the Bible*, 47.

<sup>163</sup> Miguel A. De La Torre, “Liberation Theology and Social Justice: A Defense” in *Christian Faith and Social Justice: Five Views* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 79.

experiences, but upon closer historical examination, this has been proven to be false.<sup>164</sup> Learning from the experiences of multiple backgrounds, including race, gender, socio-economic levels, country of origin, and immigration status, allows for the re-hearing of essential events and interpretations of religious texts. The same is with theologies; all theologies are particular. This allows someone the opportunity to reframe, relearn, and modify one's position while understanding and learning that not all experience is the same, even within the same group, class, or race. There is a limitation to this as well; all knowledge that a person has is filtered through "interpretational limits" and bias.<sup>165</sup>

James Calvin Davis articulates this well:

If I watch nothing but Fox News for my information about the world, then the information I possess and how I understand the world will be shaped by the values to which my exclusive source subscribes. The same is true if I watch nothing but MSNBC. If I watch nothing but MSNBC or Fox, I may erroneously conclude that what I am seeing on those news programs is 'objective truth,' because I will lack any comparative vantage point. I will lack significant perspective from which to be self-critical about my own biases and those of my favorite new source. I also will lack any biases by which to understand devotees of other news sources, because I will have no exposure to those alternative interpretations of the world. That, in turn, may lead me to make uninformed assumptions about what 'they' believe, assumptions that themselves reflect the interpretive biases of my sources as much as they do the reality of my antagonists' beliefs.<sup>166</sup>

How does or can a minister bridge this gap of knowledge and the willingness to engage critically with the topics of the texts? Given the rhetoric and one-sided debates on various media outlets, some followers of Christ formed a "righteous coldness" which has been "cultivated over

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<sup>164</sup> Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History*, 3.

<sup>165</sup> James Calvin Davis, *Forbearance: A Theological Ethic for a Disagreeable Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2017), 37.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

time by local and collective practices of nation-building, supported by prevalent social norms as they are articulated by both public policy, dominant media and the strategies of war.”<sup>167</sup> Tensions exist within the pews. For some Christians, it is morally reprehensible that immigrants must face cruel and inhumane conditions in search of peace, freedom, and a better life for themselves and their family. William Chip states that “no Christian society should entice its impoverished neighbors to wade rivers, evade armed guards, trek across deserts, and put themselves in the hands of criminal smugglers to keep down the price of lettuce and landscaping.”<sup>168</sup> For others, however, this is less an argument about immigrant’s “rights” and more about exercising and enforcing the “rule of law.” The discussion here is centered around the notion that a society or civilization cannot function without rules and laws establishing order. They contend that the United States has an immigration system that those seeking entrance can utilize; while it may have issues in some areas, but overall, the system works. The counterargument to this position argues that “laws themselves cannot establish a just society unless members of society want to behave justly; the law is of little use without moral education.”<sup>169</sup>

Political issues are rarely this opposite, “because politics is so (and often falsely) binary, it makes us believe every situation has two options to choose. The reality is we don’t.”<sup>170</sup> Across the generational divides, the views on immigrants differ. For instance, three-quarters of Millennials (75%) say immigrants strengthen rather than burden the US, which compares with 63% of Gen Xers, 52% of Baby Boomers and 44% in the Silent Generation.”<sup>171</sup> Additionally,

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<sup>167</sup> Houston and Ebrary, *You Shall Love the Stranger as Yourself: The Bible, Refugees and Asylum*, 66.

<sup>168</sup> William W. Chip and Michael A. Scaperlanda, “The Ethics of Immigration: An Exchange,” *First Things* 183 (May 2008): 40-46.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>170</sup> Holland and Beth Silvers, *I Think You're Wrong (but I'm Listening)*, 79.

<sup>171</sup> Jones, “Majority of Americans Continue to Say Immigrants Strengthen the U.S.”



beginning to dismantle a deeply held or previously held belief is a difficult process. This arises because “strong feelings about issues do not emerge from deep understanding” and because people generally believe they know more about a topic or situation than they do.<sup>172</sup>

Immigration is an issue of belonging: one group dictates to another group whether they belong. Persons seeking entrance into the United States want to belong and live freely within the country without the fear of persecution or live into the idyllic “US American Dream.” US American policymakers, however, act as “gatekeepers” to allow or disallow certain people or groups from belonging. No matter the country of origin or destination, “people on the move, are among the most vulnerable members of our societies.”<sup>173</sup> The lack of resources, finances, understanding of laws, and customs places this segment of the population at a considerable disadvantage.

The theological examination of immigration policies and their engagement with religious beliefs is not without its limitations. Through various hermeneutical lenses such as geo/social-political criticism, historical criticism, liberation theology, and feminism, a broader understanding of the ramifications and interpretations of immigration policies can inform theological thinking on immigration. For instance, many socio-political debates are taking place in the United States which “center on disagreements about the meaning of social justice.”<sup>174</sup> Social justice, thus, refers to “reconstructing society in accordance with principles of equity, recognition, and inclusion.” Furthermore, social justice requires “confronting ideological

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<sup>172</sup> Kolbert, “Why Facts Don't Change Our Minds.”

<sup>173</sup> Robert W. Heimbürger, “Fear and Faith in the Kin-dom: New Explorations in the Theology of Migration,” *Modern Theology* 31, no. 2 (January): 338.

<sup>174</sup> Vic McCracken, “Social Justice: An Introduction to a Vital Concept: in *Christian Faith and Social Justice: Five Views* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 2.

frameworks, historical legacies, and institutional patterns and practices that structure social relations unequally so that some groups are advantaged at the expense of other groups that are marginalized.”<sup>175</sup> Immigration fits into this category of social justice as it is focusing on how others are treated and welcomed in a society, community, and nation.

Merely viewing immigration as a social justice topic is too simplistic. Persons of faith (in particular Christians) view the world through a theological lens or hermeneutics. Theology has a place in the public sphere, outside of the church and religious setting. Christians are asked to utilize theological thoughts and principles when responding to the needs of others and answering the calls of others in their community, state, nation, and world. The Bible is then transformed from principally a normative text to a book of faith and a tool for the examination of how the world is and what changes need to be made in light of the various divine principles that emanate from it. The Bible becomes a measuring stick to which a person and community’s action is measured as a faithful response to the commands, ideals, and teachings found within the sacred pages. A new way of understanding humanity, peace, action, and justice are found through the biblical text. It is a dialogue partner in how a Christian responds and articulates her/his theological principles that are important to a discussion on immigration.

As Ana T. Bedard states, “Biblical justice” is “measured by how the most vulnerable members of society fare.”<sup>176</sup> It is through employing principles central to many of the biblical texts like grace, mercy, compassion, justice, and hospitality that a broader, more defined theology of immigration/migration can be found. One such principle is the value of hospitality,

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<sup>175</sup> Adams, Bell, and Griffin, *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice*, 4.

<sup>176</sup> Ana T. Bedard, “Us versus Them? U.S. Immigration and the Common Good,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*, 28, 2, (2008), 131.

which is an essential and foundational Christian tenet; it is “not optional for Christians, nor is it limited to those who are specially gifted for it. It is, instead, a necessary practice for the community of faith.”<sup>177</sup> Immigration is seen as a Christian imperative because it is viewed by some as the ultimate act of hospitality. By treating migrants as Christ in one’s presence, followers of Christ are fulfilling the summary of the law and prophets as articulated in the Gospels (Matt 22:40). Additionally, Jesus the Christ advocated for those on the outside of society’s class system and structure.

For example, in Luke’s parable of the Good Samaritan (10:25-37), Jesus declares that a Samaritan was “good” and had more faith than some of the Jewish leaders of the time. This was culturally significant, given the conflicts that Jewish and Samaritan people had during Jesus’ lifetime. It is an oversimplification of the story to make it only about being nice to the “other.” While this is a Christian value and tenet, a deeper meaning is lost if the historical context with the theological laws is not ascertained. In Jesus’ time, the relationship with the Jewish and Samaritan peoples was strained. Centuries of conflicts and believing that one group was lesser than the other led to this. Samaritans were not to associate with Jewish people and Jewish people in Jesus’ time even used the term “Samaritan” as an insult (Jn 8:48).

A broader understanding of immigration can be found in this text. In this narrative, the Pharisees are trying to trap Jesus first, asking which of the over 600 laws of the Hebrew Bible is considered the greatest. When Jesus answers that the greatest commandment is to love God and neighbor, a clarifying question of “who is my neighbor?” prompted this parable (Lk 10:29). Jesus, through this parable, shows the term “neighbor” has a much wider definition than the

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<sup>177</sup> Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans, 1999), 31.

crowd or community believes. This raises questions for the church universal today, is the church loving our neighbor as we love our self? How is the Good Samaritan parable a model for hospitality in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century church?

Other examples from the Gospels include eating with tax collectors who worked for the Roman occupation (Matt 9:10-17; Mk 2:15-22; Lk 5:29-39) and those who overtaxed the people so that they may make a wage (Lk 19:1–10). Jesus also was ostracized for associating with “sinners” (Lk 15:1–2), declaring that a poor woman’s offering was greater than any others (Mk 12:43–44), and physically touching persons who were afflicted with leprosy, which was specifically against the Law of Moses (Matt. 8:1-4). On top of that, Jesus was also welcoming to women in his ministry even though they held low social and legal status in first-century Israel. The women played an important role in finding Jesus’ burial tomb empty and telling Jesus’ disciples (Matt 28; Mk 16; Lk 24; Jn 20). It is women who proclaim that resurrection has taken place. Also, throughout the Gospel records, Jesus is praising women’s faith, engaging in theological debate and conversation as well as proclaiming that the Good News of God is not limited to one gender or even nationality. It is this framework that allows feminist theologians to approach justice through the lens of the “lived experience of injustice which people on the margins, especially women, face.”<sup>178</sup>

Barrier breaking and accepting the “other” are indicative of the Christian Gospel; thus, “welcoming the stranger” (Matt 25: 31-40) or “[loving] the alien as yourself” (Lev. 19:34) are foundational to the lived-out Christian experience. This notion of hospitality and acceptance applies in the areas of faith and politics, specifically in immigration. Both testaments of the

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<sup>178</sup> Laura Stivers, “A Christian Feminist Theory of Justice.” in *Christian Faith and Social Justice: Five Views* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 109.

Christian Bible “offer a vision of a universal actualization of the kind of incarnation of the word of God that manifests itself in world reconstruction and its accompanying realities of social and economic justice for all human beings.”<sup>179</sup>

Hospitality is clearly evidenced throughout the biblical record, and a definition must be established. Letty Russell describes hospitality as “the practice of God’s welcome by reaching across difference to participate in God’s action bringing justice and healing to our world in crisis” or the “unexpected presence of God and Christ.”<sup>180</sup> This understanding of hospitality is shown in a variety of ways throughout the biblical record as caring for the whole person and their well-being. Whether it is Abraham welcoming the three guests (Gen 18), the commands in the Law of Moses regarding “outsiders” (Ex 22), Jesus’ teaching on interactions with the “other,” or Paul’s exhortation regarding actions within the newly formed church (Rom 12), the thread of hospitality is woven throughout the Bible. Hospitality, therefore, is more than just being nice or making people feel welcome; it is a “mutual ministry where we often exchange roles and learn the most from those whom we considered different or ‘other.’”<sup>181</sup> This understanding of hospitality creates a shift in the thinking of the Church and in Christians today and is an extension of God’s holy welcome extended to all people who are created in the *Imago Dei* (Image of God).<sup>182</sup> By understanding those interpretation limitations and those guiding postulates that drive one’s reading of the biblical text, hospitality contributes to understanding the way we

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<sup>179</sup> Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert, *Reading from this Place* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 93.

<sup>180</sup> Letty M. Russell, J. Shannon-Clarkson, and Kate M. Ott, *Just Hospitality: God's Welcome in a World of Difference*, 1st ed. (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 19.

<sup>181</sup> Russell, *Just Hospitality*., 20.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

read the biblical text and why we read it as such. This also applies to the way we read hospitality in the biblical text.

### **Hospitality Examples in the Bible**

There are many examples in the biblical record regarding migration and hospitality. One example is found in Genesis 18. In this story, Abraham was resting in the heat of the day, and he is visited by three men. Abraham immediately gets up and offers the travelers food, drink, to wash their feet, and to rest in the shade of a tree. On top of that, Abraham kills a calf and prepares it for the travelers, and he asks Sarah, his wife, to make bread. After the travelers have been fed and refreshed, they stated that they are coming to Abraham's home. It is there that they declare that Abraham, even in his advanced age, will have a child, a son.

This narrative reading of Genesis 18 is highlighted as the model for hospitality in Abraham's story. Scholars have noted that Abraham's actions went above and beyond what was socially and religiously required at the time. For example, three measures of flour would have yielded a large amount of bread, more bread than for three travelers.<sup>183</sup> Many theologians and scholars, throughout time, have interpreted this narrative in different ways. For example, Josephus believed that this story highlighted the hospitality of God in light of the inhospitality of Sodom and Gomorrah at the end of the chapter.<sup>184</sup> Philo of Alexandria had a long explanation of this passage. On the one hand, he believed that the story was allegorical. He thought that the three visitors were three figures "the self-existent, beneficent, and sovereign powers of God."<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> Andrew E. Arterbury, "Abraham's Hospitality among Jewish and Early Christian Writers: A Tradition History of Gen 18:1-16 and its Relevance for the Study of the New Testament," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 30, no. 3 (2003): 360.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, 365-366.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*: 362.

Philo then argues that the “haste” that Abraham works with respect to the preparation for the travelers is “more proof of Abraham’s wisdom and ultimately his piety.”<sup>186</sup> Philo also connects the hospitality of Abraham and the announcement of the birth of Isaac. For Philo, the eventual birth of a long-awaited child is a reward for the hospitality shown to the three travelers.<sup>187</sup> This thought was echoed as well by first-century author Clement in his text *I Clement*.<sup>188</sup> “Clement claims that because of Abraham’s ‘faith and hospitality (φιλοξενίαν) a son was given to him in his old age’ (10.7). Thus, *I Clement* follows on the heels of Philo by inserting the concept of reward into the tradition.”<sup>189</sup>

Another layer to the entire story of Abraham is the notion that he was a sojourner. He was asked by God to leave his homeland and to journey to a place where God would provide for him (Gen. 12:1). Abraham is too often referred to as “the patriarch” rather than “the migrant.”<sup>190</sup> In this text, Abraham is still on his journey to his new homeland. In this narrative, we find Abraham and Sarah to be both hospitable and migrants themselves; “arguably, the story of Abraham is analogical to the experiences of the immigrants. As an immigrant, Abraham was primarily a nomad, meaning he migrated from one geographical location to the other in search of pasture and food.”<sup>191</sup> Hospitality is something that is extended to a person out of the desire to fulfill their needs and desires. There is nothing expected in return; thus, it comes from a mutual understanding of the goodness of God’s love and mercy in our lives.

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<sup>186</sup> Ibid.: 363-364.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid., 364.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid.: 366.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

<sup>190</sup> Zorodzai Dube, “Abraham and Jesus as Ancient Migrants: An African Migration Perspective,” *Perichoresis* 14, no. 1 (2016): 66.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid.: 67.

An often-overlooked piece of the traditional “Christmas” narrative in many ecclesial settings is the holy family fleeing to Egypt. This story is only found in Matthew 2, but it does shed some light on the importance of hospitality, immigration, and refugee status for Matthew. After the birth of Jesus, Herod, the ruler of Galilee, was threatened by the attention that was being given to Jesus. In a dream, an angel tells Joseph to take Mary and Jesus to Egypt for the child’s life is in danger; indeed, all males two years old and under were in danger. Matthew clarifies that this was to fulfill a prophecy taken from Hosea 11:1, thus employing the Jewish scriptures to support his position. Yet, some scholars have pondered the other families who were left in Galilee during Herod’s wave of destruction.

Are they the next wave of refugee migration to Egypt at the turn into the 1st century CE? Do these refugees catch up with the Joseph family and if so, what type of exchange might have happened? Did this lead to the ongoing isolation of the Joseph family on arrival at their destination or did the families travel on and remain together on arrival? What type of political scene did they encounter in Egypt; does our intertextual reading with Exodus, suggest that initially it may have been a friendly reception (Ex 1:1–10). How many other Jewish refugees had gone before them as a result of Herod’s oppressive reign? And what was their experience during that time of diaspora living ‘until the death of Herod’ (Mt 2:15)? The narrative, with all eyes fixed on Jesus, does not allow us to find answers to these questions but our exploration, attentive to the experience of contemporary migrants, leads us to raise them.<sup>192</sup>

This story describes how Jesus became a refugee at the beginning of his life. “Jesus, Joseph, and Mary became ‘undocumented’ migrants, fleeing for their lives. They got to Egypt and did not have ‘papers’; they ‘crossed’ the border, probably under cover of night, seeking ‘sanctuary,’ seeking ‘asylum.’ We do not know where they stayed, but we do know that someone sheltered them.”<sup>193</sup> It is only after the death of Herod that the holy family returns to Nazareth.

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<sup>192</sup> Elaine Mary Wainwright, "Crossing Over; Taking Refuge: A Contrapuntal Reading," *Hervormde Theologische Studies* 70, no. 1 (2014): 3.

<sup>193</sup> Joan Maruskin, "Ministering to the Refugee Christ," *Mission Studies* 17, no. 1-2 (2000): 198.



This migration had a lasting impact on Jesus as well as the followers of the first century. Jesus' ministry is on the move; he declares the birds have nests, foxes have holes, but he does not have a place to sleep (Lk. 9:58). The focus on migration and movement is central to Jesus' ministry as others follow him on his journey throughout Israel.<sup>194</sup>

The story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is an often misused and misunderstood tale in the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible. This story found in Genesis 18-19 has been used as the basis or framework for anti-LGBTQ+ theology, actions, and practices. In this passage, God tells Abraham he has declared judgment on the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah for their wickedness and sin. Abraham, worried about those who are righteous in the town, asks God to reconsider destroying the cities if fifty righteous people could be found. God agrees, and this begins a back-and-forth discussion between God and Abraham. In the end, God agrees with Abraham that if ten righteous people are found there the cities will be spared and then departs. God does not speak again in this story after Genesis 18. In Genesis 19, two angels come to the town square of Sodom, and Lot, Abraham's relative, greets them and invites them into his house to stay the night. The angels agree, and Lot takes them in. Once the angels are in Lot's care, the men of the city surround Lot's house and ask, "Where are the men, both young and old, who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, so that we may know them."<sup>195</sup> Scholars have debated for many years what the Hebrew word that is translated as "to know" might mean. Some have argued that it has a sexual connotation, while others have argued that it means to interrogate or question.<sup>196</sup> Some scholars believe that the men of the city believe Lot's guests were spies from

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<sup>194</sup> Dube, *Abraham and Jesus as Ancient Migrants: An African Migration Perspective*, 70.

<sup>195</sup> Genesis 19:5

<sup>196</sup> Holly Joan Toensing, "Women of Sodom and Gomorrah: Collateral Damage in the War Against Homosexuality?" *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 21, no. 2 (2005): 67.

neighboring cities and did not want them to be in Sodom.<sup>197</sup> As for the qualifier “both young and old” found in Genesis 19:4, this does not mean every single male in the city. However, this could be referring to the leadership of the city that is divided into “youths or young people” and “elders or older people.”<sup>198</sup>

Lot does not want the men of the city to “to know” his guests and pleads that they leave. The crowd refuses and Lot offers his own two nameless virgin daughters. They were not satisfied with that arrangement, so the angels pull Lot back into the house and the men of the city were struck blind. The angels encourage Lot and his family to flee and not to look back. God rained sulfur and fire on the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.

This narrative has disturbing images, and it is difficult for some to believe that it is in a book that many people consider sacred and inspired. Aside from Lot offering his own daughters to the men of the city, woven throughout this specific piece of scripture is the notion of insiders, outsiders, welcoming, care, and protection. Lot welcomes the people into his home and thus has a duty to protect them, care for them. Questions have been raised by theologians and scholars (particularly feminist/womanist scholars) who ponder why protection was only given to the outsiders but not to Lot’s own children.

Modern interpretations of this text have focused more on the potential sexual acts that the “men” of the city were wanting to have with the outsiders. This is a narrow view of this passage and one that is not commonly held in theological academic circles. Toesning argues that the

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<sup>197</sup> Ibid.: 68.

<sup>198</sup> Scott Morschauser, “‘Hospitality’, Hostiles and Hostages: On the Legal Background to Genesis 19.1-9,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 27, no. 4 (2003): 468.

notion of an entire town being comprised of homosexual men does not make sense.<sup>199</sup> Also, the prophet Ezekiel declared that Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed because the town had forsaken the poor and outcast. Ezekiel 16:49 reads, “This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy.” For sure, the biblical texts are filled with the theme and value of hospitality in antiquity, and, as is also seen, the theme of hospitality is complex. Nonetheless, the theme fills a narrative gap in the national discourse on immigration today that illustrates that caring for the stranger reaches back in our religious history, one seen as part of an ecclesial-theologizing.

The prophets of Israel frequently reminded the nation and its leaders of their responsibility to care for people in their midst or kingdom. While it might be simplistic, the calls of the prophets could be divided into two categories: “those common to all humanity and those that Israel understands as specific to it.”<sup>200</sup> Woven throughout the prophet’s declaration is a reminder of the covenant that God has with Israel and how those covenants should inform the actions of people and its leadership. For example, the prophet Amos speaks a word from the Lord to the kingdoms of Uzziah and Jeroboam concerning their actions against neighboring nations; The Lord proclaims: “For three crimes of Gaza, and for four, I won’t hold back the punishment, because they rounded up entire communities, to hand them over to Edom.” (Amos 1:6). These oracles and visions cast a vision for what God wanted from the people; oracles elicit nuanced reflection with words that do not require literacy to understand. Prophets used cinematic

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<sup>199</sup> Toensing, *Women of Sodom and Gomorrah: Collateral Damage in the War Against Homosexuality?*, 71-72.

<sup>200</sup> David L. Petersen, “Introduction to Prophetic Literature,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, vol. 6, 1994, 20.

images to “characterize historical settings and human behavior, so that the parallels between fact and fiction create a new design for understanding reality.”<sup>201</sup>

There is a strong social justice component in the prophet’s messages. It is inaccurate to merely define a prophet as someone who predicts the future. The prophets were the mouthpieces of God and were given a message for the entire people to hear. Often the messages were not pleasant and directed to people in power regarding their policies and actions specifically against people with low wealth and status. Thus, the prophets have addressed the issue of immigration and hospitality. For example, Zechariah 7:9-10 reads, “Thus says the Lord of hosts: Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another; do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another.”

In the Law of Moses, there is a strong conviction that immigrants should be welcomed, cared for, and honored. Exodus 22:21 reminds the newly freed Israelites that “You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien; for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.” Many times, throughout the Torah and the other parts of the Hebrew Bible, this refrain is echoed. The people of Israel had suffered under the tyrannical reign of many Pharaohs and knew the collective pain of being an “outsider.” The Law of Moses reminds the people of Israel that no one else should ever know that pain, suffering, loneliness when they are with God’s people. This notion is repeated in Leviticus 19:33-34, 24:22, 27:19, Deuteronomy 6:10-13, and Deuteronomy 10:18-19 as well as many others. This theme of welcome and acceptance cannot be overlooked; it is the foundation of the Israelite social platform regarding human-to-human interaction. Knowing the

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<sup>201</sup> Galen L. Goldsmith, 2011. “The Cutting Edge of Prophetic Imagery.” *Journal of Biblical and Pneumatological Research* 3: 3–18. **Correct formatting of date**  
<http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.tcu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=cookie.ip.uid&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0001877449&site=ehost-live>, 3. **URL unnecessary**

struggle of the immigrant allows the people to remember their struggle and should drive the community to rid the pain and injustices they are feeling. This command is not just directed to everyday people but also to the Kings, who were also asked to respond to the needs of others. The prophets were able to bring messages, albeit difficult ones, to the powerful and privileged of their society. They spoke a word of repentance and transformation, not just because it was the right thing to do but because it reflected the heart of God. If God is calling Israel to be different than the communities around them, then it must begin with the immigrants and the sojourners in their midst.

The New Testament attests to these statements from the Law of Moses and the Prophets. Jesus the Christ uses them as a foundation to build from in order to show his followers how a life with God should be. Jesus took common teachings on hospitality and put a new emphasis on them. This was not to invalidate the Law of Moses but to continue to build on it and continue to draw out from it the messages of God. People were important to the ministry of Jesus, and how those people were treated reflected on how well they loved and knew God. For example, the Gospel of Mark tells the story of Bartimaeus, a blind man. He calls out to Jesus, and Jesus' disciples try to get him to be quiet so Jesus can continue his journey to Jerusalem. Jesus scolds the disciples and asks that Bartimaeus be brought to him. He gives Bartimaeus sight, and Jesus continues his journey to Jerusalem, where he will be crucified (Mk. 10:46-52). Jesus, even in the face of his own trial and death, took time to grant Bartimaeus his request to see.

Jesus, many times in the Gospel records, crossed boundaries that society or nations had erected. He was reprimanded by the Pharisees and Sadducees for eating meals with "tax collectors and sinners" (Matt. 9:10-17, Mk. 2:15-22, Luke 5:29-39). Additionally, he stated, "those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not

the righteous but sinners” (Mk.2:17). Jesus’ hospitality was not bound by borders on a map or even by race or religious understanding. However, Jesus reinterprets hospitality as not something that is commanded of humanity but as an expression of one’s faith and love of God. The actions that Jesus reminds his followers to live out are extensions of the love and law of God.

Hospitality, thus, is a foundational tenet to the lived Christian experience. Welcoming others, caring for their needs, and calling attention to injustices that plague humanity is advocated in the scriptures. Some Christians, such as Franklin Graham, believe that immigration is “not a Bible issue.”<sup>202</sup> This viewpoint omits the pervasive theologizing of immigration found within the Bible. Many times, the holy scriptures point the reader and, by extension, the Christian community to reflect on how the Bible’s call to care for all of God’s people is taking place in society. Immigration is more than a political issue; it is a theological one as well.

### **Ecclesial Theologies of Immigration**

In the realm of immigration reform and policy, a clear theological argument is rarely seen and arguments are often mixed across Christian denominations and communities.<sup>203</sup> Studies have found that children, their safety, and wellbeing are among the main reasons immigrants make a long journey from Central and South America to come to the United States.<sup>204</sup> However, many

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<sup>202</sup> Joel Baden, “Evangelist Franklin Graham Says Immigration ‘not a Bible Issue.’ Bible Says He’s Wrong,” *The Miami Herald*, February 12, 2017, <https://www.miamiherald.com/opinion/article132281374.html>.

<sup>203</sup> Melkonian-Hoover, *The Politics of Religion and Immigration*, 26.

<sup>204</sup> Sara Burrone, Bina D’Costa, and Goran Holmqvist, “Children’s Wellbeing Linked to Migration Desire, Plans,” Gallup Polling, February 8, 2019, <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/gallup/246578/children-wellbeing-linked-migration-desire-plans.aspx>.

views of the immigrant's journey are often reduced to coming to work in the United States to have a better life, "live the American dream," support family members residing in their country of origin or to be a "public charge" by using government social programs.<sup>205</sup> This stark contrast misses the intricacy and complexity of the immigration debate.

Within the conversation of immigration is a notion of journeying. A person or family has to leave their country of origin and traverse to a new land. There are two different categories of "journeying" that an immigrant undertakes: internal and external. An external journey is

traveling from home country to the host country; [journeying] also refers to an internal journey of movement within the host country. Persons leave their home countries for a variety of motivations: political reasons (e.g., civil unrest or colonialism); economic causes (e.g., globalization, scarcity of jobs); cultural reasons (e.g., social migration to reunite with family, religious intolerance); and natural causes (e.g., earthquakes, hurricanes). Internal journeys are also caused by a plethora of reasons: socio-economic (e.g., searching for jobs); political (anti-immigration laws); cultural (e.g., English-only laws); and natural (e.g., famines).<sup>206</sup>

By merely reducing a topic to a sound bite or tweet, the nuance and complexity of the argument are lost. Many conversations, both in-person and online, are built on these simplified statements, which are solely established to help solidify and firmly plant one's position without considering whether they might be untrue or one-sided. Confirmation bias can set in with some people willing to ignore alternative views, opinions, perspectives, and histories because they do not support their underlying belief or position. When the conversation is constructed in this fashion, discussions and learning suffer greatly.

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<sup>205</sup> Jason Silverstien, "Trump Official Revises Statue of Liberty Poem to Defend Migrant Rule Change," *CBS News*, August 14, 2019, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/statue-of-liberty-poem-emma-lazarus-quote-changed-trump-immigration-official-ken-cuccinelli-after-public-charge-law/>.

<sup>206</sup> Francisco Lozada, Jr. "Journey and the Fourth Gospel: A Latino/a Exploration," *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 65, no. 3 (2011): 265.

With regard to Christian responses, besides using the Bible, theologizing within an ecclesial context is also employed for or against a position on immigration. Much theological debate, arguments, and denominational splits have taken place to clarify or define one's positions on certain issues ranging from the role of women in the ministry of the church to how engaged the Church should be in social justice issues. As discussed above, throughout the biblical text is a thread colored by immigration, migration, unsettlement, resettlement, and hospitality. The language of immigration and the essence of immigration—human mobility—is surely present.

The Church universal addresses the issue of human mobility by turning to the Bible as the source of God's interaction with the world, listening to the response of the community, and reflecting on what it means to live a faithful life. These stories contained within the Bible need to be examined and analyzed so that the Word of God may be given life and thus applied to the issues in today's society and culture. Followers of Christ must find meaningful ways to activate the biblical stories in the lives of people with regard to immigration. It is not just the biblical stories that are important to this discussion, however. The ecclesial theologies emanating from Christian denominations must also be welcomed. That is, the understanding of the *missio Dei* (mission of God) is central to this theological examination of immigration. Sheldrake writes that the mission of God for a follower of Christ is "the divine activity of self-disclosure in creation, salvation history, and the incarnation, drawing all things into the limitless embrace of God's unifying love. The life of discipleship is to participate ever more deeply in this *missio Dei* through a faithful following of Jesus, the bearer and expression of God's mission."<sup>207</sup> Christian

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<sup>207</sup> Philip Sheldrake, *Explorations in Spirituality: History, Theology, and Social Practice* (New York: Paulist, 2010), 95-96.



denominations aim to bring this expression to bear on Christian living toward migrants across the world.

### **Christian Denomination Theological/Doctrinal Viewpoints of Immigration**

Denominations across the theological spectrum have tried to articulate a theological position on immigration. For example, the Assembly of God denomination has acknowledged that there is a tension between “law and order” and the commandment of Jesus the Christ to love our neighbor.<sup>208</sup> Additionally, the National Council of Churches has called for immigration reform as a measure to ensure security for all people as well as upholding the biblical principle of justice.<sup>209</sup> Other mainline denominations such as the United Methodist Church, the Presbyterian Church (USA), and the Episcopal church have denominationally supported refugee, migrant, or immigrant ministries. There is a tension, however, within Christian communities about how to navigate these waters. In this part, three Christian denominations’ immigration stances will be examined: the Southern Baptist Convention, the United Church of Christ, and the Roman Catholic Church. The goal is to show how within Christianity there is a wide variety and degree of interpretations regarding immigration. These denominations are across the theological spectrum and are approaching the topic of immigration in different ways. While they may use the same Bible, it is in their application and interpretation that changes what ministry, action, and a faithful response might look like. By examining these denominational stances, a broader picture of the ecclesial theologies of immigration can be ascertained. Thus, these stances can then be

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<sup>208</sup> Melkonian-Hoover, *The Politics of Religion and Immigration*, 27.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid., 27.

held in tension with the DOC position and their theological understanding of personal “freedom of belief.”

The Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), along with the Roman Catholic Church, are on the opposite ends of the theological spectrum from the United Church of Christ (UCC). Nonetheless, while all denominations believe in God, Jesus the Christ, and the movement of the Spirit, it is in the application and focus of certain theological principles that make them different and similar. For example, the UCC was one of the first Christian denominations to affirm the worth of homosexual persons and called for justice to happen in the United States.<sup>210</sup> This is something that both the SBC and the Catholic church have renounced in the past. But they all have statements on migrants—ranging from restrictive-leaning positions to open borders-leaning positions. This analysis will show that these three denominations hold some similar positions while at other times holding differing views. The tension found within these denominations could contribute to the muted response by other communities, congregations, and ministers.

### The Southern Baptist Convention

The Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) has shifted their views of immigration and migration over time. The first resolution regarding immigration was passed at a Convention, a biannual meeting of the denominations in 1985. It celebrated the tenth anniversary of the Southern Baptist Convention’s resettlement of about 12,000 Indochinese refugees as well as 2,618 from nineteen other countries. The resolution encourages congregations to “increase their involvement in the resettlement of legal refugees through the enlistment of sponsors and the

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<sup>210</sup> Open and Affirming Coalition of the United Church of Christ, “From Repeal of ‘Sodomy Laws’ to Advocacy for Marriage Equality,” accessed July 2, 2020, <http://openandaffirming.org/about/history/ucc-actions/>.

provision of church-centered ministries.”<sup>211</sup> However, after the “conservative resurgence” in the 1980s within the denomination, their stance began to change. In 2006 a resolution entitled “On the Crisis of Illegal Immigration” presented the Convention’s concern for the immigrant’s well-being and called on the Federal and State governments to act by “enforcing the laws of the land.”<sup>212</sup> Twelve different scriptures from both testaments were cited as biblical support and rationale.<sup>213</sup>

In this document, the SBC sets out its understanding of the two kingdoms or realms in which followers of Christ find themselves. They acknowledge that humanity has responsibilities as citizens of both the nation and the “divine institution of government” as well as the “heavenly Kingdom.”<sup>214</sup> In this view, Christians are to respect the laws and actions of the government, but the government also must uphold and enforce these laws. Throughout the resolution, there is an interplay between the “kingdom of the world” and the Kingdom of God. On the one hand, Christians are to act with compassion, love the neighbor (Mk 12:30-31), and follow the “golden rule” (Matt. 7:12). On the other, the SBC makes a bold, somewhat political statement when they advocate for the federal government to act swiftly and seriously as they provide “security of our nation by controlling and securing our borders.”<sup>215</sup>

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<sup>211</sup> Southern Baptist Convention, “Resolution On Refugee Resettlement,” accessed June 1, 2020, <http://www.sbc.net/resolutions/751/resolution-on-refugee-resettlement>.

<sup>212</sup> Southern Baptist Convention, “On the Crisis of Illegal Immigration,” 2006, accessed June 1, 2020, <https://www.sbc.net/resource-library/resolutions/on-the-crisis-of-illegal-immigration/>.

<sup>213</sup> The scriptures used in this resolution include: Mt. 22:21, Phil. 3:20, Titus 2:14, 1 Peter 2:9, Romans 13:1-7, Matt. 25:34-40, Matt. 22:39, Mt. 7:12, Jas 5:4, Duet. 24:17-22, Lk. 10:30-37, Lk. 19:10

<sup>214</sup> SBC, “On The Crisis of Illegal Immigration”

<sup>215</sup> Ibid.

The most recent resolution regarding immigration was in 2011, adopted in Phoenix, Arizona. In 2010, the state of Arizona passed a wide-sweeping immigration law, which gave law enforcement the right to inquire about immigration status when someone is arrested as well as in specific situations such as traffic violations and speeding tickets.<sup>216</sup> While the resolution did not speak to this law specifically, it did, however, echo some of the same points and theological principles found in the 2006 resolution. This particular statement uses eighteen different scriptures, references, and sources to support their argument.<sup>217</sup> It reaffirms the call of the Great Commission (Matt. 28) as well as loving one's neighbor (Mk. 12); at the same time, the SBC is arguing for the church to submit to governmental authorities as expressed in Romans 13. The resolution names the fact that, at the time, there were 12 million undocumented immigrants (a change from illegal immigrants as used in 2006) and that their "invisibility" leads to "detrimental consequences in terms of health, education, well-being, especially of children."<sup>218</sup> Even though the SBC calls attention to the struggle of the immigrant community that compassion is short-lived; the resolution states explicitly that undocumented immigrants are violating the law and the government must enforce the laws of the land. Again, there is a double-speak happening. First, on the one hand, the resolution calls for compassion ministries and the ending of exploitive mistreatment of workers through low wages; thus, the SBC sees this as antithetical to the gospel message of Jesus the Christ. They also call on the ending of bigotry aimed toward persons of

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<sup>216</sup> Ann Morse, "Analysis of Arizona's Immigration Enforcement Laws," National Conference of State Legislatures, July 28, 2011, accessed June 30, 2020, <http://www.ncsl.org/research/immigration/analysis-of-arizonas-immigration-law.aspx>.

<sup>217</sup> The scriptures cited in this resolution are: Rev. 7:9, Ex. 1:1-14, 1 Chron. 16:19, Acts 7:6, Matt. 2:13-23, Ex. 22:21, Duet. 10:18-19, Ps. 94:6, Jer. 7:6, Ez. 22:29, Zech. 7:10, Matt. 28:18-20, Mk 12:30-31, Matt. 25:40, Is. 3:15 Amos 4:1, James 5:4, Rom. 13:1-7

<sup>218</sup> Southern Baptist Convention, "On the Immigration and the Gospel," 2011, accessed June 1, 2020, <http://www.sbc.net/resolutions/1213>.

different countries of origin. Second, on the other hand, the SBC does not believe or condone the federal government granting “amnesty” to the millions of undocumented immigrants in the United States. Instead, they want a “just and compassionate path to legal status” that must have “restitutionary measures.”<sup>219</sup> These two resolutions are the only ones that have been adopted by the SBC. They utilize a hermeneutic of legalism that views the commands and laws of the Bible as superior to the message of love and grace found through the text. “For the Bible tells me so” is not a helpful or authoritative hermeneutic without nuance and theological examination.

### The United Church of Christ (UCC)

The United Church of Christ (UCC) has been more socially and theologically progressive than many other denominations. The first resolution regarding immigration brought before the General Synod, the biannual gathering of the denomination, was in 1995. The resolution grew out of what the church called “a growing intolerance directed toward ‘non-European’ immigrants, a great number of whom are naturalized citizens of long standing who are increasingly being blamed for [the] country’s economic and social ills.”<sup>220</sup> Since 1995, the UCC has adopted several resolutions regarding immigration, justice for undocumented workers, and the church’s response. The UCC joined the DOC in supporting the work and ministry of Humane Borders in 2001. Recently, the UCC adopted a resolution supporting comprehensive immigration reform and the affirmation of human rights for all immigrants. The resolution called the current immigration system “dysfunctional” and stated that it did not “reflect denominational or national

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<sup>219</sup> Ibid.

<sup>220</sup> United Church of Christ, “Justice and Immigration Resolutions,” The United Church of Christ, accessed July 8, 2020, [http://www.ucc.org/justice\\_immigration\\_resolutions](http://www.ucc.org/justice_immigration_resolutions).

values.<sup>221</sup>” They requested that the 113<sup>th</sup> Congress of the United States of America consider the eight points laid out in the resolution. Some of the points were “earned legalization with a path to citizenship,” “updated future flow of immigrants for workers and unification of families,” as well as the “ending of Operation Streamline, stopping of the construction of the southern border fence and limiting additional immigration border patrol agents.”<sup>222</sup> In almost all of the resolutions, the UCC calls upon the members of the denomination and its partners to implement the change and justice they are seeking.

The UCC views this as putting one’s faith into action. The UCC invites its communities to engage in the process of wrestling with faith and action. The denomination believes that justice is a foundational tool for the living into the Kingdom of God. UCC churches, therefore, find themselves fighting injustice in their community, state, nation, and around the world. There is a thread of connection between humanity and faith that is being articulated by the UCC and their justice ministries. There is a notion that the members of the UCC want to take direct action when faced with a topic that they believe needs a theological, Christian community response such as immigration. The UCC, through its national and international ministries, calls on all people of the Christian faith to bear witness to the injustices that are plaguing their communities and world. They believe that a follower of Christ cannot ignore problems in their area or nation when the biblical record calls for an engagement of theological and hermeneutical processes.

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<sup>221</sup> United Church of Christ, “Resolution Supporting Compassionate Comprehensive Immigration Reform and the Protection of the Human Rights of Immigrants,” General Synod Resolutions, accessed July 8, 2020, <http://uccfiles.com/pdf/gs29-14.pdf>.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid.

## The Roman Catholic Church

The Roman Catholic Church is the largest Christian denomination globally and has made several declarations about immigration. The US Catholic Bishops in 2000 wrote a pastoral letter entitled *Welcoming the Stranger Among Us: Unity in Diversity*. In this letter, a theological grounding is given for immigration policy and immigration itself. It calls for the church to remember its pastoral duty and call with respect to immigrants. Also, it reminds Catholics that the call of a follower of Christ is to remember their “tradition of welcome and pastoral concern.” It recognizes that there are institutional hurdles as well as cultural fears surrounding immigration and, by extension, immigrants themselves. The bishops also call for solidarity with immigrants, they contend:

In an age of economic globalization, a special concern of a culture of solidarity must be the migrant worker, both rural and urban. These laborers are vital to our agricultural, construction, service, and tourist industries. From the time they leave their homes to the time they arrive at their place of work, these migrant workers—forced to search for a basic livelihood for their families—face hazardous border crossings. (In the past five years, more than 500 have died at the U.S.–Mexico border because of increased border enforcement.) They are vulnerable to exploitation and abuse in transit, in border regions, and in the workplace.<sup>223</sup>

In 2003, the US Catholic Conference of Bishops with the Bishops of Mexico produced a joint pastoral letter entitled *Strangers No Longer: Together on a Journey of Hope*. In this document, they establish five principles of immigration that are in line with Catholic social teachings; “persons have the right to find opportunity in their homeland; persons have the right

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<sup>223</sup> United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Welcoming the Stranger Among Us: Unity in Diversity,” *USCCB*, last modified November 15, 2000, accessed November 1, 2020, <https://www.usccb.org/committees/pastoral-care-migrants-refugees-travelers/welcoming-stranger-among-us-unity-diversity>.

to migrate to support themselves and their families; sovereign nations have the right to control their borders; refugees and asylum seekers should be afforded protection; the human dignity and human rights of undocumented migrants should be respected.”<sup>224</sup> While this is broad, they do speak to the conflicts that both the United States and Mexico face regarding migrants coming in and out of the countries. Within this letter, the bishops call for Catholics to respond to the needs of the immigrants, arguing that their contributions are good for the overall wellbeing of the country. However, the bishops make a point to show that immigrants are treated unfairly, work for low wages, and are not a burden on public goods and services.<sup>225</sup>

A 2006 study showed that 73% of Anglo Catholics and 83% of Latinx Catholics in the United States believed that immigrants should be allowed to stay in the country, possibly permanently.<sup>226</sup> The bishops were clear to articulate that even though nations have the right to secure their own borders, for many migrants, being denied entry into the United States is a continuation of their poverty and lack of age-appropriate education.<sup>227</sup> Bishop Theodore McCarrick<sup>228</sup> argued that for change to take place in government and society, a change must first happen in the hearts and minds of many followers of Christ.<sup>229</sup> Interestingly, *Strangers No Longer* argues that if a path to work is granted to immigrants or migrants, this process needs to “employ labor market tests [to assure that] US workers are protected.”<sup>230</sup> Even in this pastoral

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<sup>224</sup> Bedard, “Us versus Them?”, 118.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>227</sup> Chip and Scaperlanda, “The Ethics of Immigration,” 41.

<sup>228</sup> In 2019, the Vatican announced that that Theodore McCarrick had been defrocked for sexual abuse of seminarians. See Chico Harlan, “Ex-cardinal McCarrick defrocked by Vatican for sexual abuse,” *The Washington Post*, February 16, 2019, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/ex-cardinal-mccarrick-defrocked-by-vatican-for-sexual-abuse/2019/02/16/0aa365d4-2e2c-11e9-8ad3-9a5b113ecd3c\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/ex-cardinal-mccarrick-defrocked-by-vatican-for-sexual-abuse/2019/02/16/0aa365d4-2e2c-11e9-8ad3-9a5b113ecd3c_story.html).

<sup>229</sup> Chip and Scaperlanda, “The Ethics of Immigration,” 41.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid., 42.



letter, the US and Mexican Bishops are still arguing that the rights of the citizens of the United States be upheld over the needs of employment for the immigrants. Some have argued that *Strangers No Longer* was an excellent theological examination of immigration and provided the Catholic churches in the United States and Mexico grounding to have conversations and discussions about their community's role in support immigrants and migrants. Additionally, some communities have used *Stranger No Longer* as the basis for advocating and/or becoming a sanctuary church or city, although even then it is met with resistance.<sup>231</sup> *Stranger No Longer* called on Catholic churches to extend hospitality to migrants and immigrants, to establish shelters with support for children as they are vulnerable, as well as to remember and support those who are detained or incarcerated.<sup>232</sup>

These ecclesial positions are not the first time that the US Catholic church has addressed immigration and migration. At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was a rise in immigration to the United States. During this time, there was also an increase in anti-Catholic and anti-Jewish rhetoric. Many believed that Catholics and Jewish people were “undesirable” and against the “American way of life.”<sup>233</sup> The Catholic Church has now turned the spotlight away from European Catholics toward Latin American Catholics and others. These documents are evidence of it.

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<sup>231</sup> Gary Slater, "From Strangers to Neighbors: Toward an Ethics of Sanctuary Cities," *Journal of Moral Theology* 7, no. 2 (2018): 60.

<sup>232</sup> United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Inc. and Conferencia del Episcopado Mexicano., “Strangers No Longer Together On the Journey of Hope,” United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, January 22, 2003, <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/immigration/strangers-no-longer-together-on-the-journey-of-hope.cfm>.

<sup>233</sup> Richard Gribble, "The Immigration Restriction Debate, 1917-1929: Church and State in Conflict," *Journal of Church and State* 60, no. 3 (2018): 405.

At the same time, Pope Francis, the Bishop of Rome and head of the Roman Catholic Church, has been openly critical of US immigration policy, specifically the construction of barriers, walls, and the way that immigrants are treated. In a 2019 address, Pope Francis stated that “builders of walls, be they made of razor wire or bricks, will end up becoming prisoners of the walls they build.”<sup>234</sup> Numerous times he has denounced a “culture of indifference” regarding immigrants and refugees and the deaths associated with their travels.<sup>235</sup> He has called on all people of faith, both Catholics and Protestants, to embody the teachings of Jesus the Christ by loving one's neighbor as themselves.

Overall, these three denominations approach this topic in different ways. The SBC appears to give more authority to the State and thus leans toward a policy restriction. The UCC is giving weight to the Bible over the State and therefore leans toward a more open border policy. And the RCC holds onto church written responses on immigration and thus leans also toward a more open border policy with an emphasis on the protection of all workers. What they have in common is that they all see the issue of immigration that cannot go unaddressed. At the center of these resolutions is the notion of serving God and Christ faithfully while caring for the individual's physical, emotional, and spiritual needs. It is in the interpretation and implementation of these texts that the Church then can appropriately respond to the needs of the immigrant community and have a faithful witness and response in preaching and worship. However, across denominations and within local congregations, there are going to be differences

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<sup>234</sup> Phillip Pulella, “Pope Criticizes Building Walls to Keep Migrants Out,” Reuters, March 31, 2019, <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/03/31/pope-francis-on-immigration-political-leaders-risk-becoming-prisoners-of-the-walls-they-build.html>.

<sup>235</sup> Gerard O'Connell, “Pope Francis Reminds Christians That Migrants and Refugees Should Be Welcomed Around the World,” *American Magazine*, September 29, 2019, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2019/09/29/pope-francis-reminds-christians-migrants-and-refugees-should-be-welcomed-around>.

about theology, Christology, and the movement of the Spirit as well as the role of the Church with respect to immigration. This is where the problem is within a church congregation. Congregants' political positions on immigration spill over into differences of theological expressions—no matter where their denomination stands on the issue. While not all theologies are valid or equal, having differences within a community does potentially allow for the hearing and articulation of different positions, especially when it comes to the work of the church.

### **Having Different Ecclesial Theological Viewpoints on Immigration**

Taking a more critical look at immigration through a theological lens can prove to be beneficial when trying to articulate a theologically grounded and informed reason and perspective. In the United States, the dominant “race” for the entire existence of the country is European descent/Anglo (after Native Americans). Recognizing one's dominant voice and one's privilege in the culture is a first step that will allow a European-descent person to begin to willingly hear different voices, thoughts, cultures, beliefs, and interpretations of a biblical text from a different perspective. By listening to different perspectives, partially from minority communities (i.e., Non-European Descent), European-descent folks can see and hear positions that perhaps were in their “theological blind spots.” For example, Asians, Latinx, and Africans/African Americans have a shared US history in that they all were “plantation workers” who were “exploited as cheap migrant labor to build the master’s economy for the master’s profits and to maintain through that process white supremacy.”<sup>236</sup> They “read against” the dominant viewpoint and culture that dictates what is normative for everyone.<sup>237</sup> This cultural

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<sup>236</sup> Randall C. Bailey, Tat-Siong Benny Liew, and Fernando F. Segovia, *They were all Together in One Place?: Toward Minority Biblical Criticism* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 18-19.

<sup>237</sup> De La Torre, *Reading the Bible from the Margins*, 8.

dominance is seen in the way that laws, societies, and even history are constructed.<sup>238</sup> By dismissing a viewpoint merely because it is incongruent with the stated historical norms and mores, the entire picture, the entire history of a community, nation, or people, thus, is not seen or heard.

This understanding of multiple voices and hermeneutics regarding biblical reading and understanding is called “reading-with” cultural divisions and constructs.<sup>239</sup> How the Bible is understood, used, and interpreted can have a lasting effect on the community or society. Segovia argues that when the voice of the “other” is heard, the question of who benefits from this reading becomes central to fully understanding the cultural interpretations as well as illuminating the reader's embedded theological bias.<sup>240</sup> Through this lens, a reader is asked to “read with” a community as to gauge their understanding (as best they can) as well as to bring to light views and voices that have been silenced by the dominant culture and societal constructions. These voices include minorities (groups other than European descent/Anglo males, including feminist, womanist, LGBTQ+, etc.). These subcultures often “compete” against one another and were not on the forefront of academic thought and conversation until the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>241</sup>

There is some Christian theological understanding that immigration policies in the United States are problematic, amoral, and non-life honoring. However, there is disharmony on how to address this issue. Some claim that Christians need to obey the rule of law that has been established and encourage those who are undocumented to utilize the resources that are provided

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<sup>238</sup> Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History*, 220.

<sup>239</sup> Fernando F. Segovia, *Interpreting Beyond Borders* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 60.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid., 61-62.

<sup>241</sup> Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History*, 220.

for them as it literally states in Romans 13:1, “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God.” Within some segments of Christianity there is a theological notion that the government has a divinely inspired command to follow the rules of the society as well as enforce those rules.<sup>242</sup> Others have viewed the situation with immigrants and migrants as an opportunity to proselytize and convert people to the Christian faith.<sup>243</sup> Viewing immigrants has an opportunity to grow one’s faith group denies the humanity of the immigrant as well as the reason for helping them. While the message of God should be shared, it does not mean, however, that it is the sole motivating factor for supplying care, help, need, and grace. By holding to these views of Christian immigration, it, unfortunately, overlooks the problem of the complexity and injustice that can be found in the immigration system. Also, it looks over the contributions that immigrants (documented or otherwise) have made to the community.<sup>244</sup> This reductionist view of immigration draws clear and specific lines where at times, there is no clear way to go. Just as there are many different Christian denominations, there are many different ways of approaching, analyzing, and addressing the issue of immigration from an informed theological perspective. While many Christians may not be able to name a specific theological framework such as Neo-Orthodoxy, Post-Modern, or Process Theology, they are operating from a theological construct. Theologians offer insight, tools, and guidance when navigating theology. It is important for ministers who are of European descent to begin to listen to the voices, views, and theological opinions of those outside of their racial construct. It is important that they “read-with” the marginalized in society. By doing so, they will be able to evaluate closely how their embedded or

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<sup>242</sup> Land, *A Just, Fair, and Compassionate Immigration Policy*, 21-22.

<sup>243</sup> Yang, *A Christian Perspective on Immigrant Integration*, 80.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid.

privileged theology and race are influencing and constraining their theology worldview and hermeneutics.

### **Ecclesial Theological Perspectives of Immigration**

Assumptions, derogatory terms, phrases, and accusations of immigrants influence how a person views immigrants coming to the United States; this also affects how Christians read, interpret, and apply biblical texts in an ecclesial setting. If someone reads the Bible from a position of superiority or views persons as less than or outside of the accepted group, then this will shift and alter the way that a biblical passage is interpreted or understood. This raises questions of how presumptions are infiltrating the church's worship, liturgy, preaching, prayers, education, and ministries.

Given that immigration is a complex, multifaceted issue with theological roots, being able to understand and hear new interpretations and applications of scripture is essential for faith development and for having a fuller picture of the movement and power of God. Rooted in the conversations regarding immigration from South and Central America and Mexico is the theological outlook of liberation theology, specifically Latin American liberation theology. From this perspective, justice is defined as beginning with the "plight of the poor, the oppressed, the marginalized, the outcast, and the disenfranchised" where God is "offended by the dehumanizing conditions into which the marginalized are relegated."<sup>245</sup> Latin American liberation theology articulates a "framework that explicitly addresses both voluntary and nonvoluntary dimensions of social sin."<sup>246</sup> These sins are broad categories of unjust social structures and "distorted

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<sup>245</sup> Miguel A. De La Torre, *Christian Faith and Social Justice: Five Views*, 87.

<sup>246</sup> Kristin E. Heyer, "Social Sin and Immigration: Good Fences make Bad Neighbors," *Theological Studies* 71, no. 2 (2010): 420.

consciousness,” which lead to injustice and dehumanization.<sup>247</sup> The increased restrictions on immigration, particularly at the southern US border, “have driven people to take more dangerous routes, in part because such policies fail to mitigate factors propelling most migrants to attempt the journey.”<sup>248</sup> Exploring the way that liberation theologians understand and interpret the biblical texts will help frame the discussion that could be taking place in local congregations. This might provide a problematic perspective to consider, given that many people in the United States had not faced persecution on a scale that many people in Latin American were facing when this theological framework was being constructed.

Miguel De La Torre considers himself an ecclesial scholar-activist and writes extensively on how the Latinx person has a unique perspective regarding the Bible and Christianity. He calls for the non-Latinx persons to listen deeply to the stories and hermeneutics of the Latinx community. De La Torre also believes that many of the ethics paradigms that are in place are too European-centric in their construction to be applicable for Latinx populations.<sup>249</sup> He arrives at these positions from a postcolonial and postmodern hermeneutic of suspicion which “rejects the trustworthiness of *any* narrative about the purported direction in which human history is surely moving.”<sup>250</sup> De La Torre’s theological framework is grounded in postcolonial work which calls for all people (regardless of race) to consider how the cultural paradigm of colonialism is still prevalent in society. For example, he describes a time when he was pulled over while driving.

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<sup>247</sup> Ibid.: 413.

<sup>248</sup> Kristin E. Heyer, "Internalized Borders: Immigration Ethics in the Age of Trump," *Theological Studies* 79, no. 1 (2018): 79.

<sup>249</sup> Miguel De La Torre A., "Doing Latina/o Ethics from the Margins of Empire: Liberating the Colonized Mind," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 33, no. 2 (2013): 3.

<sup>250</sup> David P. Gushee and Codi D. Norred, "The Kingdom of God, Hope and Christian Ethics," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 31, no. 1 (2018): 9.

Upon reflection on the event, he comes to the realization that his mind had been indoctrinated by the culture of colonialism; “I was not angered that I was ethnically profiled; instead, I was thankful society was being kept safe. My mind was so colonized that I did not, I could not, see how my identity was being constructed.”<sup>251</sup> Therefore, he calls for people of faith to consider how the dominant European-centric culture has been colonizing the minds of people to continue to perpetuate Eurocentric ethics which contribute to oppression. He argues that Latinx people, thus, need to liberate their colonized minds and not continue to live into an ethic that is not supportive or affirming of non-European persons.<sup>252</sup>

De La Torre uses this hermeneutic when reading and interpreting the biblical record. For example, he argues that the birth accounts of Jesus found in Luke should be read as “anti-colonial literature about a native resident living under an invading colonial foreign power.”<sup>253</sup> He begins to break down the traditional understandings and interpretations of the Christ birth narrative away from a romanticized tale to one that is grounded in the notion that Jesus chose to be poor and that coming to the world as a poor human “creates a sacred space where the marginalized can grapple with their spiritual need to reconcile their God with their daily struggle for justice and dignity.”<sup>254</sup> Through this lens of liberative theology, an entire group's perspective on God is contextual and viewed as valid as well as listened to and contemplated.<sup>255</sup> De La Torre contends:

The Gospels of Jesus Christ are politically charged, revolutionary documents. Yet many Euro-American religious leaders in megachurches and well-paid theologians

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<sup>251</sup> De La Torre, *Doing Latina/o Ethics from the Margins of Empire: Liberating the Colonized Mind*, 4.

<sup>252</sup> *Ibid.*: 5.

<sup>253</sup> Miguel De La Torre A., "A Colonized Christmas Story," *Interpretation* 71, no. 4 (2017): 408.

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*: 414.

<sup>255</sup> Donna Yarri, "Navigating Liberation Theologies," *Religious Studies Review* 45, no. 2 (2019): 177.



in comfortable ivory towers exert great energy to neuter and domesticate the political call for justice that resonates in the words of Jesus. The radicalness of the Gospels--a message usually missed by the privileged living in nice houses within the heart of the empire--is watered down. The Jesus narratives, at their core, are anticolonial literature about a native resident displaced by the invading imperial power.<sup>256</sup>

De La Torre's condemnation of the inaction of the Euro-American Christian church spills over into his theological view of immigration. By calling for the removal of Eurocentric thinking, he is calling for a new paradigm for seeing people. He argues that Latinx persons are constantly navigating borders; these borders are not necessarily physical government barriers but the border of disenfranchisement and privilege.<sup>257</sup> Part of the ethos that is developed when straddling these two borders is that many immigrants from Central and South America begin to lose their cultural roots, traditions and beliefs because it can be an impediment to growth and assimilation into the United States' Euro-centric culture.<sup>258</sup> Latinx persons are viewed as not belonging to the United States even if they were a part of the founding of the country.<sup>259</sup> De La Torre claims that the reason why persons from Latinx dominant countries are coming to the United States can be traced back to the introduction of bananas to the country's diet. When the fruit was brought to the United States of America in 1880 it set into motion a series of events that would lead to the United States military invading countries like Guatemala to overthrow a democratically elected government to control US American interests in the fruit sector.<sup>260</sup> This

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<sup>256</sup> Miguel A. De La Torre, *Burying White Privilege: Resurrecting a Badass Christianity* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2019), 7.

<sup>257</sup> Miguel De La Torre A., "Living on the Border," *The Ecumenical Review* 59, no. 2-3 (2007): 215.

<sup>258</sup> Martínez, *Border People: Life and Society in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands*, 95.

<sup>259</sup> De La Torre, *Living on the Border*, 215.

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid.*: 215-216.

involvement of the US government has led to the crippling of economies and the deterioration of communities throughout Central and South America. All of this was done to secure US American interests and to keep the cost of goods and services from outside of the United States down. Therefore, the bodies, lives, and work of Latinx, non-US American persons are expendable as long as it continues to support the economy and people (generally of European descent) of the United States of America. This has led De La Torre to declare that white Christianity has “ceased being a religious faith tradition rooted in the teachings of Christ. It is not focused on justice and the betterment of humanity.”<sup>261</sup> He contends that all European decent persons are racist not for their beliefs (which may not be racist), but for their benefiting and participation in the social norms and structures designed to benefit them.<sup>262</sup> He continues, “racism depends on which group controls power and uses that power, at the expense of others, to provide privilege for one group. In this country, at this time in world history, the face of racism happens to be white.”<sup>263</sup>

For De La Torre, the Bible must be read and understood from the margins of society, from people who are experiencing oppression, pain, and rejection from the Eurocentric culture.<sup>264</sup> Reading from the margins, as De La Torre describes it, means that the reader of a biblical text needs to beware of the bias that they are bringing to the text. A person’s interpretive lens is “not created in a vacuum,” rather it is autobiographical and reflects the person’s upbringing, thinking, and dominant culture influences.<sup>265</sup>

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<sup>261</sup> De La Torre, *Doing Latina/o Ethics from the Margins of Empire: Liberating the Colonized Mind*, 18.

<sup>262</sup> De La Torre, *Reading the Bible from the Margins*, 22.

<sup>263</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>264</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid., 3.

He does not hold back in his critique of “white Christianity,” which he argues influences not just persons from European descent but all races and even religions given its pervasive dominance in the United States.<sup>266</sup> “US American Christianity” has replaced the message of the justice and love of Jesus with the message of greed and war. Too often, people have decided that to be a “US American” means to be a good Christian and vice versa.<sup>267</sup> This mentality rejects the notion of the “melting pot” theory of US immigration. De La Torre contends that Latinx persons are not formed into a US American but rather into something that is still European in nature.<sup>268</sup> Given this ideal, De La Torre is critical of the previous Trump administration as well as his followers, particularly those who are Christian. He believes that the former Trumpian politics of rejection, discrimination, and hate are antithetical to the central message of Jesus the Christ. The Trump presidency lived into the flawed notion of US exceptionalism, which places Euro-Americans at a higher regarded place than people of color.<sup>269</sup> Given the President Trump’s past call for more border security via a wall, De La Torre believes this is due to failed US American economic policies like NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) that did not supply countries like Mexico with the financial benefits of having US-owned factories in their countries. The businesses in the United States profited from the cheaper labor, but the downturn in economic development in Mexico (and other Central and South American countries) has led many people to leave their homelands. Thus, in the next few decades, the number of Latinx

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<sup>266</sup> De La Torre, *Burying White Privilege: Resurrecting a Badass Christianity*, 4.

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid.*, 26-27.

<sup>268</sup> De La Torre, *Living on the Border*, 218.

<sup>269</sup> De La Torre, *Burying White Privilege: Resurrecting a Badass Christianity*, 21.

persons in the United States will be one in every four. This is seen as a threat to the European-centric way of life.<sup>270</sup>

De La Torre believes that for immigration to be beneficial to all persons coming to the United States white Christians need to recognize their privilege, decolonize their minds, and allow people of color to live and work as Latinx people, not people who are an amalgamation of US Americans and Latinx persons. This is a bold statement, but it is one that is grounded in the theological notion of the worth of all people, loving one's neighbor, and radical hospitality. By doing so, one is engaging in justice. This justice, however, is framed within the confines that Eurocentric ethics do not support or speak to the justice issues found in minority communities.<sup>271</sup> Therefore the call to become a church of the oppressed is done by standing in solidarity with those on the margins of society.<sup>272</sup> For De La Torre, "justice begins with the plight of the poor, the oppressed, the marginalized, the outcast, and the disenfranchised. To engage in justice is to do it with, and from, the perspective of those whom society considers (no)bodies."<sup>273</sup> It is this social justice that Christians are recognized by.<sup>274</sup> This is because "Eurocentric approaches to justice fail marginalized communities because they seldom consider their own complicity with the Empire."<sup>275</sup>

Protestant US denominations are trying to ascertain the best interpretation and application of the Bible for their communities. Throughout Christian history, denominations have defined

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<sup>270</sup> De La Torre, *Living on the Border*, 217-218.

<sup>271</sup> De La Torre, *Christian Faith and Social Justice: Five Views*, 81.

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>274</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>275</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

and refined their theological postulations. This is true with respect to issues that are being discussed and analyzed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. No ecclesial theology or denomination is static in their hermeneutic, thus it is incumbent on ministers and followers of Christ to be engaged with the issues in their nation and community as well as trying to frame them in a theological manner. Theologians help with this navigation as they try to formulate specific and tangible iterations of the Divine for humanity. The ecclesial theology of immigration is complex. Some people do not separate immigration from the action and the immigrant person. They are viewed together, considered equally negative. Once Christians, particularly those of European descent, begin to see how their own history and views are framing their political and theological views, then change will be possible. This places ministers in a position of teaching and leading on a complex and multifaceted topic.

Given that there is a tension that exists in how denominations and scholars interpret the biblical text and how they construct a theology around immigration, this tension, for sure, spills into churches themselves, particularly with denominations such as the DOC where it can pass resolutions on immigration while local churches can take an opposite position. This chapter has brought to the forefront the complex issues at play when ministers are navigating politics and religion. Searching for a solution to know how to navigate these areas is not simple. In what follows, a glimpse of a solution might be possible. The next chapter presents five interviews with ministers who will give a modest look at how they navigate politics and religion or, more specifically, immigration and theology.<sup>276</sup> Questions that I hope to address are: What are some common themes that emerge among the DOC ministers in Texas? What is the impact of these themes within their congregations and denomination at large? What tools might be at a minister's

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<sup>276</sup> By no means do these five interviews will be fully representative of the DOC denomination at large.

disposal to help them in this task of navigating politics and faith around the issue of immigration?

## CHAPTER FOUR: APPROACH AND RESULTS

### Analysis

Given the complexity of the intersection of ecclesial theologizing and immigration, and how it played out in the broader arena (denomination, society, ecclesial statements, and hermeneutics), an attempt to provide a closer look at the issue follows in this chapter. Thus, I interviewed five Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) ministers as a way to examine the issue of politics and faith with respect to immigration.

As shown above, the topic of immigration is not simple. The interviews conducted will reflect this complexity, and they will draw, indirectly and directly, on immigration history, the issue of sovereignty, biblical hermeneutics, vision of God, hospitality, and the biblical text. The narrative approach and analysis undertaken in this project is guided by a comparative or horizontal analysis that looks at a single interviewee's thinking in relation to other interviewees.<sup>277</sup> This particular approach views the interview itself as an oral text, and asks what can be learned from its language, its themes, and repetitions. This narrative analysis is focused on how the ministers experience their navigation of faith and immigration. It does not aim to

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<sup>277</sup> For the qualitative approach, the interview approach is employed. The aim here is to capture the interviewee's subjective perspective on theology and immigration rather than concluding with any "objective" or universal understanding on the issue. To protect the identities of the interviewees (given the small number of persons interviewed), this study chose to translate their responses with a broad brush to generate generalizations. See, particularly chapter seven, "The Interview," and chapter nine, "Interpretation," in Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000 [1978]). See also chapter three "The Big Picture" in Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011. Also, chapter twenty-one "Ethnography" by Mary Clark Moschella in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2012. I am also quite aware that I am also a DOC minister and understand that I am a "participant observer," see Renato Rosaldo, *Culture & Truth, The Remaking of Social Analysis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993).

critique the interviewee or her or his experiences, but rather to perform a descriptive analysis to throw consciousness on the wider and intersecting issues of faith and immigration.

To participate in this project, the minister needed to meet some criteria.<sup>278</sup> First, the minister needed to be either the Senior Minister or sole minister serving a Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) congregation in Texas. Second, the congregation needed to be theologically as well as politically diverse (i.e., conservative, progressive, moderate) in its composition. The minister could draw from her/his experience within the church community or draw from a congregational study that had been taken within the last five years. Multiple ministers were asked to participate and five met the criteria for this project.<sup>279</sup>

All participating ministers were ordained in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and have a combined 70 years of ordained ministry experience with an average of 14 years. All five ministers interviewed hold Master of Divinity degrees from accredited theological seminaries or divinity schools. Only one currently holds a doctorate degree (Ph.D.). The average length of time serving their current congregation was 6.5 years, with the range being one year to ten years. All were of European descent and United States citizens by birth. Four of the ministers reported that their congregation reflected members of European Descent, with one church having a majority of Latinx members. The gender breakdown of those interviewed was four males and one female.

The congregations served by these ministers are a blend of theologically and politically conservative and progressive members. Within each congregation, the ratio varies. There is a

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<sup>278</sup> See Appendix A

<sup>279</sup> In total, 15 ministers were asked about their participating in this project. Some ministers were not able to participate due to scheduling conflicts and 3 ministers did not fit the criteria of this project.



distinct difference of ecclesial theologies, political leanings, supporting of political candidates, and how “hot topics” are constructed or interpreted. This is significant for this project because Texas, over the past several Presidential and gubernatorial elections, has been predominately Republican or conservative (as the latest 2020 election showed), thus leaning toward more restrictive policies on immigration. The last time a Democratic candidate for President won the state of Texas was Jimmy Carter in 1976. In the 2016 election, Donald Trump received 52% of the popular vote in the state with Hilary Clinton receiving 43%.<sup>280</sup> Four of the five ministers stated that they voted for Hilary Clinton during the 2016 election; those same four stated (at the time of the interview) they would support former Vice President Joe Biden in the 2020 election. One minister voted for the Libertarian candidate, Gary Johnson, in 2016; at the time of being interviewed, this minister had not decided on who they would be voting for or if they would be voting at all in the 2020 election. This political divide within the state of Texas is mirrored within congregations across the state. The “purple” nature of the state has led to church communities having a variety of political stances and beliefs. Other border states (e.g., Arizona, New Mexico, and California [southern California in particular]) and communities fall within this paradigm. Thus, the importance of being able to speak to, with, and for those of different backgrounds, beliefs, and ideals is paramount and challenging for ministry in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Hence, the inquiry of this project.

The congregations discussed in this project reside in both rural and urban settings which allowed for multiple views, perspectives, and configurations of political and theological constructions to emerge. For example, one congregation is in a small town that has a high

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<sup>280</sup> 270 to Win Team, “Texas,” 270 to Win, accessed October 3, 2020, <https://www.270towin.com/states/Texas>.

number of citizens who are affiliated with the Republican party as reflected in their “small-town” ideals and conservative values (e.g., against same-sex marriage, in favor of pro-life values, and in favor of building a wall on the Southern US border). The minister in this community stated that some of their members might agree with their friends who are Southern Baptist on some theological issues but might not care as much about social issues like abortion and gay marriage. Other ministers were serving in more urban areas, which historically have a higher number of progressive or liberal-leaning persons and values (e.g., promotion of diversity, welcoming the stranger, in favor of same-sex marriage).<sup>281</sup> The geographic location of a congregation did not significantly influence the political composition of the church membership. One church that was in a more conservative area of Texas found that some of the more “progressive” members (both theologically and politically) find a place of refuge and safety at the respective congregation given the Disciples of Christ’s position of freedom of belief. One area where geographic location had a direct correlation was in the racial make-up of the congregation and the area in which it was located. Four of the five churches reflected the racial makeup of their area; one church, however, did not reflect the overall racial makeup of their community, but it did reflect the particular part of the town in which they are located. As a result, the Senior ministers and congregations in question, comparatively speaking, replicated the continuum of political stances and values that the state of Texas also exhibited.

### **Themes from the Interviews**

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<sup>281</sup> Rahsaan Maxwell, “Why Are Urban and Rural Areas so Politically Divided? Rural residents feel left behind by the globalized economy and alienated from big cities’ multiculturalism.,” *The Washington Post*, March 5, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/03/05/why-are-urban-rural-areas-so-politically-divided/>.

The Senior ministers were interviewed via Zoom videoconferencing during the Spring and Summer of 2020.<sup>282</sup> They were asked questions across four distinct areas: demographic, the status of in the church, congregational thoughts and beliefs, and biblical and theological hermeneutical stances.<sup>283</sup> These areas are employed to capture how the Senior ministers see (1) the Bible as a source, (2) human dignity and the Bible, (3) hospitality, (4) ecclesial identity, (5) the sacredness of the pulpit, and (6) the multiple roles these ministers play in their congregation. From these six themes, we can begin to get a better sense of how the ministers navigate faith and politics or theology and immigration.

### The Bible as Source

First, the ministers stated that the Bible does speak to the issue of immigration in a variety of ways. For example, the book of Genesis addresses the notion of the *Imago Dei* (Image of God). This understanding of being made in the image of God permeates the biblical record. If someone is made in the Image of God, then how they ought to be treated is directly proportionate to how we view God and God's creation. Also, all the ministers cited the Image of God as the basis for how humanity should be treated regardless of immigration status or nationality. As understood by many biblical scholars today, the Hebrew scriptures include a strong mandate to welcome the foreigner and immigrant. A minister articulated that "the Israelite people are migrants; they were a mass migration chain. the Israelites went across the Sinai desert to Canaan and killed everyone to take the land." In other words, for this minister, to say that immigrations are bad is to say that everyone and their migrations from the Bible is bad. The Hebrew people

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<sup>282</sup> Video conferencing instead of face-to-face interviewing was utilized due to the wide disbursement of the congregations across Texas and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

<sup>283</sup> Appendix B

were all different people who were all enslaved together, yet they became one nation through God's actions and blessings. What makes you is not where you are from, but what you claim. God asks "'do you agree with this sentiment?' and they say 'yes.'" Thus, for this minister there is a correlation between the thematization of migration in the Bible and migration in the real world. This correlation is a guide to how we treat the migrant and how this minister's congregation ought to treat migrants.

Another minister stated that immigration policy is supported in the biblical record because it speaks directly to the "heart of God." God commands God's people to continually welcome the strangers, foreigners, and immigrants throughout many books of the Bible. If this theme was not important to God and reflective of how people should be treated, then it would not show up as many times as it does in the biblical record.

Another scripture that was lifted up by two of the ministers was Matthew 11:28, which reads, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." In this narrative, Jesus reminds the people that they do not have to shoulder the burdens of life alone; one minister argued that this is the foundational scripture for immigration policy because followers of Christ are to emulate the practices of Christ with the congregation being a place of refuge and protection. Finally, another minister argued that the Bible itself does not speak to 21<sup>st</sup>-century immigration policy as we know it and stated that "nation-building is counterintuitive to the Christian movement." Nevertheless, the Christian witness and message does address how a nation should treat people, immigrants, or citizens through public policy. At the same time, there is not a blueprint for immigration in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in the biblical record, the way that laws, mandates, policies, and executive orders are enacted, and the reasons for their enactment must be acknowledged. It is only then that the Bible will be able to "shed light" on

how humanity is living into these messages, these commands of faithfulness. For sure, for these Senior ministers, the Bible is employed in a correlation manner; that is, the message of the Bible equally parallels the present world or is a way to speak (dialogue partner) to the ethical actions of how Christians ought to behave toward strangers, migrants, and refugees. In other words, it functions as a source on what to believe and how to behave toward migrants.

Turning to the portrayal of Jesus the Christ in the gospels, almost all of the Senior ministers interviewed expressed that immigration was a key piece of the birth narrative and that “Jesus was a refugee.” One minister stated, “In Jesus’ time, if the Romans had a similar immigration policy as [the United States has today], Jesus would have been killed as an infant.” There is a connection to the experience and life of Jesus and being a refugee. If people are going to love and celebrate Christ’s birth at Christmas and try to follow his commands and teachings, then this element of his birth narrative needs to be told and preached. Thus, the interviews point to the belief among the Senior ministers that refugees are experiencing the same struggle and plight that Jesus did. This cannot be overlooked when discussing immigration theologically and morally. If, therefore, a central piece of the birth narrative of Jesus the Christ is him fleeing from a tyrannical leader, then this should shed light on how we view those coming to the United States under the same conditions. Jesus thus has compassion and empathy for those experiencing this type of fleeing. In turn, Christians should also show the same compassion.

Another scripture lifted up by the Senior ministers—and that is often discussed in theological conversations on immigration—is the parable of the Good Samaritan. At the same time, this parable might be simply interpreted as a call to be nice to others. As one minister stated, “Jesus is trying to tell us what it looks like to love [a] neighbor. Love of neighbor is not just people like you but people different than you.” Throughout the scriptures, there is a constant

redefining of who a “neighbor” is. The Good Samaritan story redefines this for the reader as well as speaks to the notion that a neighbor might be someone you would not expect. As another Senior minister stated, Jesus is calling for his followers to look past “ethnic distinctions. We talk about following Jesus’ footsteps, but we want to see what Jesus saw and he saw the world.”

This parable, along with other multiple parables and passages, has Christ breaking barriers of ethnic and societal standards. What the Senior ministers have collectively said is that looking past false labels that are placed on people by virtue of their place of birth or citizenship goes against the standards set forth for a follower of Christ. They point to other scriptures that support this position, such as Galatians 3:28, which states, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus;” Revelation 20-21 where the end goal is bring every nation together to worship God; Genesis 12 when Abraham went to Egypt as an immigrant; 1 Kings 8, which calls for the listening to the immigrant; as well as throughout Exodus where the mistreatment of immigrants are called out as sinful and wrong.

For sure, in all the interviews, the Bible plays a foundational role for the ministers’ point of departure in their discussion on immigration. They help complete a narrative gap in the national discourse on immigration where policies fail to address the humanitarian convictions (Image of God) held by the Senior ministers. The interviewees strongly lean toward a hermeneutics of correlation approach, which tries to relate the ethics and the actions of key characters (God/Jesus) to the ethics and actions of Christians today. This is significant to know because it shows that the Bible remains a principal resource, interlocuter, for helping the Senior ministers navigate the issue of immigration and faith. Thus, certain key scriptural narratives

definitely serve as foundational material in setting the norms and values of how Christians ought to behave toward migrants in the present.

### Human Dignity and the Bible

The interviews also highlighted the notion of human dignity as being a key element in the conversation of immigration. If a person is created in the Image of God, then it matters how they are treated. To defame, disrespect, or dehumanize, another person is to do it to God. Thus, for these Senior ministers, a follower of Christ must examine how the actions of the government at all levels are treating those who have or want to immigrate to the United States. These understandings on hospitality are a direct connection to the ministers' theological understanding in how they view the nature of the biblical source

Many of those interviewed stated that they believed in taking the scriptures seriously but not literally; therefore, familiar passages of the Bible that are used to uphold strict, restrictive views of immigration are read in their historical, societal context. This allows the reader to examine the scriptures through a hermeneutical lens that guides the reader to what the original audience would have heard and understood. This task of biblical interpretation employed by the Senior ministers—as I see it—removes the reader's viewpoint, which might come from a place of power and privilege and allows the text to be seen and read through a more critical and understanding eye.<sup>284</sup>

There is an understanding among all of the ministers interviewed of the multiple layers of scripture interpretation as well as the importance to read them in their historical context and in community; the Bible for one minister is filled with “stories that deeply matter because they tell

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<sup>284</sup> De La Torre, *Reading the Bible from the Margins*, 5.

us how people have come to understand God. They are not expressly telling us about how God is to be understood.” Another minister described the biblical record as “the living breathing word of God.” One minister stated, “I have a high view of sovereignty and providence, almost a reformed view, that impacts where I approach scripture; I see the word of God as being inspired by God and the handing down and copying and translating in the movement into different languages, God has a part in all of that; when we encounter scripture we are encountering the words that God wanted us to know him more and know his story more.” These views of scripture inform their faith, their ministries, their preaching, and social justice actions that they or their congregation might take. For these Senior ministers, because the Bible is the Word of God, God calls for human dignity. Earlier it was argued that the Bible points humanity to a standard that speaks to the heart and nature of God and Christ. But as the ministers made it clear, it might not be what many people want to hear, yet it is still authoritative (inspired and revelatory) in one’s theological and faith development life.

The ministers did believe that immigration is an important issue and is reflected as such in the scriptures. The Bible, thus, as mentioned above, is the source and the foundation of ministry and interpretation of social events and governmental actions. Therefore, based on the interviews, a theological, critical lens is needed for the topic of immigration in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in Texas. This does not mean that the Bible is taken less seriously by not reading it critically; instead, the Senior ministers argue that due to the importance of the Bible and the power that one can wield with it, it must be viewed in a context that allows the reader or hearer to honor the sacredness of the words. Each of the ministers are using a biblically-informed hermeneutic, whether they realize it or not, to frame how they will or will not address a topic in their congregational setting like immigration. For sure, the Bible, for these ministers, is the voice for



human dignity and a necessary tool to navigate the issue of immigration and faith within their congregations.

### Hospitality

The ministers also articulated that the value of hospitality was at the heart of the Christian expression of faith. Theologian Letty Russell describes hospitality as “the practice of God’s welcome by reaching across differences to participate in God’s action bringing justice and healing to our world in crisis”<sup>285</sup> or the “unexpected presence of God and Christ.”<sup>286</sup> One of the Senior ministers stated that they appreciated Russell’s definition because it focuses on the idea of ownership; this is important because it is “acknowledging hospitality is not just a guest vs. who owns the house. Reaching across difference means that hospitality is extended on both sides, not just granting power to who ‘owns’ something. The underlying assertion is that everybody at the table, in the room, a part of the conversation, has something to offer. It is not just one hand is extended and not just one hand ready to receive.”

Hospitality, therefore, is a byproduct of the faith experience as well as demanded of God’s people. Hospitality is more complicated than merely helping others. As seen above, throughout the biblical narrative, it is highlighted that caring for the entire person is essential regardless of place of origin or ethnicity of people. During the interviews, hospitality was constantly described as something that “honors God and is worshipful, pleasing to God. God will bless those times and efforts [of hospitality].” Also, hospitality is “crossing over and seeing from

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<sup>285</sup> Russell, *Just Hospitality*, 19

<sup>286</sup> Ibid.

another perspective.” By not doing so, these ministers conveyed, a person fails to recognize the value of the other.

As seen above, the biblical text thematizes the notion of hospitality repeatedly, much like a refrain in music. The interviews also touched upon the people of Israel who were on both sides of being the “other” throughout their history (i.e., during their enslavement in Egypt, both times the people were sent into exile). As discussed by the Senior ministers, Israel wanted to ensure that no other person or group of people were ever treated the way they were treated. They saw these events as foundational to Israel’s religious and cultural history and ethos. For the Senior ministers, Israel established rules and laws that forbade the degradation of the immigrant because they themselves had been immigrants. From my point of view, the voices of the “other” in ancient Israel were not silenced—a reckoning, a remembering was to take place. The ministers surely picked up on this point. They saw this act of welcoming the strangers and providing hospitality as Israel showing other cultures and groups of people that they and their God were different.

For the Senior ministers, hospitality is a way of life and a matter of the heart. One minister regarding hospitality stated, “hospitality is often about offering shelter and refuge (such as food, drink, protection) but its more than that, it is an attitude of the heart commanded of Christ-followers. It is in the Torah that God set up a culture to be the example to the world and one of the key parts of this covenant was paying attention to the alien and foreigner; hospitality of our [Christian] faith is a driver in this conversation. It is part of our identity.” This direct statement along with others sees the Bible speaking strongly to the theme of hospitality. They made reference to various examples sporadically through the Bible. Several of the ministers called attention to the story of Abraham and the three visitors in Genesis—a key scripture in the

importance of providing hospitality to others, and Hebrews 13:2, which reads, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” Similar to the Senior ministers, Letty Russell argues that hospitality in God’s realm has four components: “unexpected divine presence, advocacy for the marginalized, mutual welcome and creation of community.”<sup>287</sup> This sums up the thrust of their understanding of hospitality and its importance in guiding their position in relationship to immigration. In other words, this understanding strongly informed their ethical actions toward migrants. If the national policies on immigration could not speak to the ethical behavior of society, these ministers turned to the biblical text to draw out the theme of hospitality as a guide on how to behave toward the Other. It is a theme, hospitality, that guides their theology; God welcomes. Therefore, immigration, for these ministers, is a matter of hospitality and thus the issue needs a Christian answer or response.

### Ecclesial Identity

The next theme that emerged from the conversations was the identity of the congregation: its composition, and notably the “power players,” were essential to understand when or when not to address hot topics in the church. All the ministers interviewed recalled times when a congregant did not like what was said during a sermon, prayer, or worship service. For example, one Senior minister stated that a sermon message had raised some concern for some of the congregants. One of the leaders within the church community went to the minister and brought forth the concern. Throughout their conversation about how the sermon was heard or misheard, the minister reminded the church leader that they knew the minister’s heart and had a good relationship over their tenure together at the congregation. This theme of relationship was echoed

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<sup>287</sup> Ibid., 82.

in other minister's responses. There is an element of building a relationship that is foundational for having conversations about issues where there is potential for disagreement. Some of the ministers articulated that they have received email, text, or phone call exchanges with members who were on the opposite side of a theological or political issue than they (the ministers) were on in their respective congregations. For these ministers, it is in the openness to dialogue, rather than readily dismissing anyone's thinking that allows for a deep hearing and understanding of the issue at hand. It is the mutual respect and understanding between one another that can give the minister the foundation on which to build upon. Without this community connection, a minister who fails to establish relationships and connections with the congregation will have a hard time when a sermon is heard in a politicized fashion. Two ministers stated that they had been approached after a sermon simply with the critique of "I wish you had not said those things." Both ministers were able to have a conversation with the person who brought the complaint. While they did not agree with each other's political stances, they were able to "agree to disagree" because of their relationship over their tenure at the congregation. Many of the ministers stated that if they were confronted or had their sermon or message or prayer questioned, they were more cautious in the proceeding weeks. One minister indicated that they recognized that their words could upset someone else's worship experience; therefore, they have "tailored [their] words by who was in the room."

Thus, reading the ecclesial identity of the congregation—just like reading a biblical text—emerged from these interviews as another aspect that ministers have to take into account when navigating immigration and faith. The ministers showed that navigating through hot topics like immigration will surely upset some members of their congregation. However, the ministers know, given the DOC's position of freedom of belief, that they will not appease all in the pews.

Though they understand the biblical narrative's thematization of migration and its ethos and value of hospitality guides their faith, they cannot assume that their congregation will come to hear the Word of God the same way as they do. To navigate immigration issues means listening carefully, following one's theological principles, and imitating hospitality as it was practiced in the biblical world.

### Sacredness of the Pulpit

There is also the issue of the sacredness of the pulpit. The ministers indicated that their call as leaders of their congregations was to bring the good news of Jesus the Christ to the congregation, and one of the primary acts to bring forth this knowledge is through the act of preaching. This strikes a balance with the notion of the church being in decline and keeping a job and the imperative to be prophetic and speak out when injustices arrive. There are times to be prophetic and a time to point others to the cross of Jesus the Christ. There is an understanding that sermons are only heard if people are present; therefore, there is an understanding that the guarding of words or even self-limiting is an act that is happening in pulpits across the country.

One Senior minister stated

"Preaching is a communal activity, and we deemphasize that a sermon is only a sermon if there are ears to hear it. I do think about what it means to preach a sermon and if I am going to go so far above and beyond where people in my congregation may or may not be, and if I do that because [I] think it's a place where they could or should be. But if I am preaching a message that they are not ready to hear but rather bring a message that is related to bring them along. I think that is what I do; I preach sermons that are authentic to who we are as a community and who we want to be. I am not worried about what we have lost, but I am hopeful for what we have gained. Communicating what the spirit is moving you to say with an earnest love for and desire for your people."

The Disciples of Christ minister Fred Craddock wrote, “anyone who is the bearer of light is thereby the creator of the possibility of a new kind of darkness.”<sup>288</sup> Ministers are feeling the tension between the proclaimed words and the audience which has gathered to hear a message from God. Some of the ministers, because of this tension and the call on their lives to be a minister of the gospel of Jesus the Christ, are not going to interject anything that might highlight a contrary view to what the congregation might have. While some ministers might at times touch on issues of the day, the focus when occupying the pulpit is one of reverence and respect for the office of minister and the responsibilities therein. One minister stated that they would not address political topics such as immigration from the pulpit, rather they would continue to point the congregation to the life, ministry, and cross of Jesus the Christ. Therefore, the minister is directing the congregation without having to specifically name the issue at hand. This allows for the congregation to be reminded of the purpose of being a follower of Christ in hopes that they will connect the dots between the proclaimed word in the sanctuary and the events unfolding outside of the church building.

Thus, the sacredness of the pulpit or the preaching of the Word of God is also not immune from the political issues of the day. It challenges the ministers to pause and think about what they will preach to the congregation, especially when the rhetoric of immigration is heightened in the United States by the politics of the day. The interviews show a sense of anxiety and a tension that ministers are facing between their calling to preach and their livelihood. They also show that ministers are navigating a political topic like immigration by reading their congregation closely and looking for paths to engage without insulting.

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<sup>288</sup> Fred B. Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, Rev. and with new sermons. ed. (St. Louis, Mo: Chalice Press, 2001), 16.

### Split Identities

Finally, the ministers serving congregations today are also playing the role of two ministers—one in worship and one out of worship. Some ministers interviewed indicated that they had two personas. The first was in the pulpit proclaiming the good news of Jesus the Christ, where politics were not mentioned often (if ever at all), and the second is in a private conversation with individual members or people within the community. One minister referred to this concept as “measuring their words.” The call and duty of a minister to proclaim the good news through homiletics was seen by those interviewed as a sacred task, one that might be disrupted by the interjection of the blending of theological and political dialogue. For some of the ministers, they would use their time of preaching to point back to the concepts, teachings, commands, and aims of the ministry of Jesus the Christ. They would not name necessarily specific persons, events, or news stories of the day; rather, they would hit on themes that these events brought out. For example, instead of speaking directly against the President’s actions or policies that are harmful to immigrants, the minister might speak to the importance of remembering that all people are created in God’s image or how Israel was a nation of immigrants. In this situation, the minister is talking around the issue instead of directly at it. Thus, the church member who is hearing this sermon will be reminded of what it means to be a follower of Christ in the hopes that they will connect what is happening in the church worship service with what is happening in the world outside the church walls. One minister recalled a time when they decided to speak directly to an issue, it “went over like a lead balloon” and they were criticized by the church leadership for their comments in the pulpit. This event had a significant effect on them, and now they are gentler in their wording, phrasing, and structure of sermons. Others were satisfied with the leaving politics out of their sermons and pointing the

congregation to Jesus who is the “source of healing for personal and social issues and that to me is good enough and faithful enough and while I at times I don’t know I can pull that off or be bold [enough to speak out like other ministers do], I also don’t lose any sleep at night about speaking out.”

Some of the ministers stated that some people in the congregation knew their political beliefs but not all. In the pulpit, they were going to be apolitical and allow the text to speak to the issues of the day without interjecting anything that might sound like politics, pushing an agenda, or that might be disrupting. One minister recalled making a joke within their sermon about the triumphal entry said “make Jerusalem great again” in reference to President Trump’s 2016 campaign slogan. The minister stated that it was tongue in cheek, and the sermon hinted that Caesar and President Trump held similar ideals. The minister recalled that they heard someone during the sermon say to their spouse, “are they telling us who to vote for?” This was not the intent; however, it shows the caution that some ministers take when crafting their messages and prayers. The smallest joke, remark, or even planned statement can be heard in a multitude of ways; thus, the congregation is hearing the message in potentially radically different ways.

In short, like the split identity of the minister that the politics of the day constructs, other themes emerged from the interviews such as the biblical text as a source, the principle of human dignity and the Bible, the theme of hospitality, ecclesial identity, and the sacredness of the pulpit, all of which show that political issues, like immigration, are pressuring these five ministers in thinking or rethinking their roles as ministers. It is calling them to read the currents in their congregation and turn to those texts in the Bible that speak to the heart of the issues. For sure, the Senior ministers conveyed that with a heightened sense of politics, their 24/7 vocation is not immune from the politics of the day.



### **Questions Raised After Analysis**

The answers given by the Senior ministers raise some important questions for other ministers and congregations as they begin to contemplate how their faith and politics intersect. First, how does being in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) influence the tentative nature and thought regarding speaking on controversial topics such as immigration, abortion, the death penalty, etc.? In some Christian communities, the leaders do not self-limit when speaking about specific issues because they believe that they are central to the Christian message and experience. However, this approach, at times, can be focusing on one angle, message, or interpretation of the gospel of Jesus the Christ. How then can a conversation take place when a sermon, prayer, or worship experience is not dialogical?

Additionally, how much does the fear of losing a job, income, or members who are big givers, play into the self-limiting of ministers? Recently, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) has been more visible and active in the social justice arena. Disciples of Christ leaders across the country have organized and participated in the Poor People's Campaign rallies and marches and Black Lives Matter protests. At General Assemblies, speakers have mentioned the "liberalization" of the denomination, especially from the General Minister and President's Office. How then can a community be fostered in these types of circumstances? While it is noted that not all theological interpretations are valid, it is worth noting that just because a person is in one theological/political position does not mean that they will remain in that position their entire life. James Fowler argued that humanity developed faith across a life cycle similar to psychosocial development. One person might be a Christian all her/his life, but it is the "way of

being Christian [that] will deepen, expand and be reconstituted several times in the pilgrimage of faith.”<sup>289</sup> Navigating these profound theological changes will take care and nuance.

Another question raised considering the global COVID-19 pandemic is how will immigration continue to be affected, and what will the role of the church be in addressing the needs of the immigrant community? One minister spoke to this when they stated, “COVID-19 is an equalizer—even if you are rich, you can die from it. We might come out of this [pandemic] refocusing on those who are most affected by this [by examining] food, housing programs, etc. These problems are not going away; you can’t wall them out because you’re just going to wall yourself in. By doing so, you are building society on who you excluded. We need a refocusing of our minds as well as our entire country. Theologians have to be the moral leadership; there is no other place for it now.”

If the church in the United States was not in decline, would ministers be more apt to speak on political issues? A couple of those interviewed indicated that the church's decline and thus the giving which funds salaries and ministries was a particular reasoning for not speaking directly to political topics. However, in other denominations as well as some Disciples of Christ congregations, this is not the case. Some ministers interviewed believe they should be calling out various social actions as “sins” such as homosexuality or abortion. They rationalize this by arguing that they are trying to maintain and keep the faith from being tainted by the world and from being “watered down.” Therefore, how does the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) fit into this conversation?

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<sup>289</sup> James W. Fowler, "Faith and the Structure of Meaning," in *Faith Development and Fowler*, ed. Craig Dykstra and Sharon Parks (Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1986), 37.

While all of the ministers addressed the theological implications of immigration and the way that the actions being taken by the former Trump administration were counter to the Christian call, none of the congregations had made a formal declaration regarding immigration, immigration policy, or even child/family separation at the Southern US Border. Nor had they ever participated in rallies or protests concerning the policies of the federal government. This is consistent with polling that indicates that only two percent of church attendees have ever heard a sermon on immigration.<sup>290</sup>

All of this is to suggest, through the interviews, that the DOC is at a crossroad and what direction it takes will have long-term consequences for the denomination. The five ministers have hinted that there is a tension between what they come to understand about immigration and migration as reflected in the biblical narrative and the world in which they minister and preach. None of the ministers stated that they had a cogent answer or solution to navigate the waters of faith and politics surrounding immigration. Just as the DOC has a variety of beliefs within its denominational structure, so too are the approaches found in DOC congregations.

There is not a “toolkit” or “essential guide” for ministers to use or reference when facing the convergence of politics and faith in their congregations. By not having any guidance, the ministers are left to try to formulate theological positions and ministry opportunities by themselves. This has led some ministers not to address issues for fear of the consequences from members in their congregation or leadership team. The impact of these interviews has a wide reach, but it will not be the same for each DOC congregation or any Christian community in the United States. How a minister approaches, argues for, and articulates the theological postulations

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<sup>290</sup> LifeWay Research, “Evangelical Views On Immigration,” LifeWay, accessed October 3, 2020, <http://lifewayresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Evangelical-Views-on-Immigration-Report.pdf>.

and importance of immigration will be vitally important for formulating a congregational response or consideration of immigration in their community, state, and nation. Being properly equipped for the challenge of addressing “political” issues is vitally important to ensure that all parties are heard and that the minister is addresses issues in a way that will bring forth conversation, not stop it.

CHAPTER FIVE:  
THE IMPACT THIS STUDY HAS ON CHRISTIAN CHURCH (DISCIPLES OF CHRIST)  
IN UNITED STATES AND CANADA AND CHURCH UNIVERSAL

**The Current Landscape**

Jim Wallis wrote that the United States has been “witnessing for decades a true moral crisis created by the failures of the immigration status quo.”<sup>291</sup> With the rise of immigrants coming to the United States, the decline of refugee applications being accepted, and policies that are constructed from a racist framework have only increased these two realities. US Americans are becoming more aware, however, of the plight of immigrants, particularly those on the Southern US Border, due to social media, ministries, non-governmental organizations, legal groups, and humanitarian organizations trying to shed light on this problem plaguing millions of people. As of October 2020, over 200,000 people have been denied entry to the United States or returned to their country of origin due to the enactment of “Title 42,” a provision that allows the federal government to act in the best interest of public safety (i.e., stopping the spread of the COVID-19 virus). This declaration has been met with challenges from medical officials in the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).<sup>292</sup> The Trump administration believes that they are within their legal rights to enforce this part of the immigration law. Because of this, many people are waiting months in Mexico in hopes that they are granted immigration or asylum status. These children of God are being kept in deplorable conditions, often without adequate

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<sup>291</sup> Jim Wallis, *America's Original Sin: Racism, White Privilege, and the Bridge to a New America* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016)

<sup>292</sup> Ariana Sawyer, “CDC Director Doubles Down On Endangering Asylum Seekers,” Human Rights Watch, October 15, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/10/15/cdc-director-doubles-down-endangering-asylum-seekers>.

water, food, and sanitation.<sup>293</sup> Due to these conditions and that human lives are involved, there needs to be a response and action from those in government and from those in the Christian faith community.

With this awareness, however, comes the questions of legality and morality. People of faith, not just Christians, are trying to formulate responses within their own communities and states. Christian ministers, especially in Texas, are finding themselves being pulled by this tension; when, if ever, does the “rule of law” “trump” the moral call of the Christian faith? Immigration is not something that can be ignored any longer because it directly affects human lives, more specifically vulnerable human lives. This is not to say that ministers in other non-Southern US border states should not or do not care about immigration. It is impossible to be in the United States and not be influenced by the policies, mandates, and rhetoric around the issue of immigration.

In Texas, for example, there is a high number of Latin American immigrants and undocumented workers. This frames how this community is viewed and treated within each state. It contributes to the social conditions and programs offered or withheld to them as well. Some states have a higher number of immigrants from Asia, Africa, or parts of Europe. But for many people and lawmakers, Latin American immigrants appear to be synonymous to the topic of immigrants. How immigrants are treated in some parts of the country is correlated with how welcoming the United States truly is and should be. This United States cannot claim to be a “nation of immigrants,” then block most of the avenues for immigrants to be part of the United

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<sup>293</sup> The Associated Press, “Mexico Rights Agency Says Migrants Held Without Light, Water,” *ABC News*, October 23, 2020, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/mexico-rights-agency-migrants-held-light-water-73795626>.

States' society.<sup>294</sup> The Church, therefore, is in a place to be prophetic, to speak to the nature of humanity, to name sin, call for dignity, and reject policies that are not life-honoring or life-giving. Thus, ministers need to find ways to connect the message of Jesus the Christ and the foundational teachings of the whole of scripture to their community. Ministers need to use the biblical text to fill in the narrative gaps on the story of immigrants in the present.

Immigration, however, is not a topic that many church members have heard spoken about from the pulpit, in prayers or liturgies; about seven percent of church attendees stated that their faith has a direct influence on their immigration stance and position.<sup>295</sup> Currently, the United States has a culture where “tolerance, healthy dialogue, and mutual respect seem to be in short supply.”<sup>296</sup> Due to federal law, churches and other non-profit organizations are not allowed to endorse candidates for political office; this does not, however, mean that churches or ministers should not speak to things that are considered “political.”<sup>297</sup> There is a desire from some ministers to do this and a need for all of God’s creation to be recognized as “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Ps. 139:14) It is the process of learning what causes immigration and how has the United States contributed to immigration, reading various histories of immigration and hearing the stories by immigrants that will make the difference in whether a community will respond or not. Their hearts and minds must experience a “turning toward” (“conversion”

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<sup>294</sup> David Davies, “How The 1965 Immigration Act Made America A Nation Of Immigrants,” *National Public Radio*, January 16, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/01/16/685819397/how-the-1965-immigration-act-made-america-a-nation-of-immigrants>.

<sup>295</sup> Pew Research Center, “Few Say Religion Shapes Immigration, Environment Views,” accessed September 15, 2020, Pew Research Center, September 17, 2010, <https://www.pewforum.org/2010/09/17/few-say-religion-shapes-immigration-environment-views/>.

<sup>296</sup> Clay Stauffer, *Preaching Politics: Proclaiming Jesus in an Age of Money, Power, and Partisanship* (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2016), 10.

<sup>297</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

experience) the Other, or, as the Johannine Jesus says, they must be “born anew”—born into a new consciousness.<sup>298</sup>

### **Ministry in 2020 in Texas**

For ministers in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century, ministry is complex and multi-faceted. Layered in conversations of state policy and the Christian response to immigration in Texas is the changing racial landscape. In 1980, Latinx persons comprised 21 percent of the Texas population. In 2018, the number had risen to almost 40 percent.<sup>299</sup> During that same time frame, persons of European descent were decreasing across the state. For example, in 1980, persons from European descent comprised 66 percent of the population; in 2015, they made up only 44 percent. It is estimated that in 2060 persons from European descent will comprise only 25 percent of the state’s population.<sup>300</sup> Thus, the 2018 Texas electorate “contained more [Latinx] voters than ever before.”<sup>301</sup> The changes that have taken place in the year 2020 have caused Christians and the world to examine how humanity cares about and treats one another with the advent of the COVID-19 global pandemic. Services, businesses, and churches have all struggled to continue to operate and make connections. A recent study found that 1 in 5 churches will face closure in the

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<sup>298</sup> Francisco Lozada, Jr. *John: An Introduction and Study Guide: History Community and Ideology* (London: T&T Clark, 2020), 38.

<sup>299</sup> Carine Hajjar, “Texas’s Uncertain Political Future,” *National Review*, June 17, 2020, <https://www.nationalreview.com/2020/06/texas-election-politics-demographic-change-may-force-parties-to-adjust-strategies/>.

<sup>300</sup> Ibid.

<sup>301</sup> Elaine Kamarck, “Is Demography Destiny in Texas?,” *Brookings*, August 9, 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2019/08/09/is-demography-destiny-in-texas/>.



next 18 months due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the decrease in attendance and offerings or tithes to the congregation.<sup>302</sup>

The immigrant population, specifically the Latinx population, has been greatly impacted by the response and level of access during the pandemic. Lawmakers and governors have been operating within a paradigm that is focusing on business and that state's economy.<sup>303</sup> These changes within the state have left some communities more vulnerable than others. This change is having a direct impact on how services are rendered and how the response to the pandemic is being handled. For example, the Texas and US Government's response has led to over 56 percent of all deaths in Texas from COVID-19 being Latinx people because of lack of healthcare and the cost associated with it. Due to this, many Latinx people are afraid to be in large crowds and situations, thus making voting a difficult task to complete.<sup>304</sup> Governor Greg Abbott enacted restrictive voting guidelines limiting voting locations and access. Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton has stated that fearing for one's health due to the COVID-19 pandemic was not an acceptable reason to receive a mail-in ballot.<sup>305</sup> This declaration was upheld in the Texas Supreme Court.<sup>306</sup> Once again, those in power are using their positions to ensure that their

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<sup>302</sup> Michael Gryboski, "1 in 5 Churches Facing Permanent Closure Within 18 Months Due to Covid-19 Shutdowns: Barna pres.," *The Christian Post*, August 26, 2020, <https://www.christianpost.com/news/1-in-5-churches-face-closure-within-18-months-due-to-covid-19-shutdowns-barna-president.html>.

<sup>303</sup> BF Staff, "Texas Tops In Business Climate, Virginia Wears Cyber Crown," *Business Facilities - Area Economic Development, Site Selection & Workforce Solutions*, last modified July 30, 2020, accessed November 7, 2020, <https://businessfacilities.com/2020/07/texas-tops-in-business-climate-virginia-wears-cyber-crown/>.

<sup>304</sup> Suzanne Gamboa, "Racist Voter Suppression': Texas Laws Keep Latinos from the Ballot Box, Groups Say," *NBC News*, October 3, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/racist-voter-suppression-texas-laws-keep-latinos-ballot-box-groups-n1241862>.

<sup>305</sup> Benjamin Wermund and Zach Despart, "Texas AG Ken Paxton Says Fear of Covid-19 Is No Excuse to Vote by Mail," *Houston Chronicle*, April 15, 2020, <https://www.houstonchronicle.com/politics/texas/article/Texas-AG-Ken-Paxton-says-fear-of-COVID-19-is-no-15203180.php>.

<sup>306</sup> Chuck Lindell, "Texas Supreme Court: Mail-In Voting Can't Expand Over Lack of Coronavirus Immunity," *Austin Statesman*, last modified May 28, 2020, <https://www.statesman.com/news/20200527/texas-supreme-court-mail-in-voting-cant-expand-over-lack-of-coronavirus-immunity>.

interests are being looked after more than the needs of others. The pandemic has highlighted, through the actions of Paxton and Abbott, that the status quo must continue to be held on to and enforced for the “greater good” of Texas and the citizenry (i.e., those of European descent and/or means and capabilities). Thus, Latinx persons and those who have immigrated to the United States are at a disadvantage compared to those of European descent.

Additionally, the gap between the “haves” and the “have nots” continues to grow as the economy fluctuates given the uncertainty of business, tax revenue, and implementation of safety protocols.<sup>307</sup> The effects of the global COVID-19 pandemic have shown how unstable the local, state, and federal economies can be. Jobs lost, food banks running out of assistance, and a sharp demand for unemployment wages has proven that within the United States, many people are vulnerable to crippling economic issues despite their race. Those who are the most vulnerable in our society is where the church should be continually focusing their ministries and efforts to bring economic and spiritual aid to the vulnerable immigrant community. The way a society treats those with little to no status speaks volumes to the ideals and priorities of that society; it is dehumanizing.

### Two “Americas”

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968 declared that in the United States there were “two Americas.”<sup>308</sup> He argued that within the United States' borders, two separate and not equal existences are realized, people of color and those of European descent. Today a similar

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<sup>307</sup> Scott Tong, “Wall Street Record High Belies Widening Gap between Investor Haves and Have-nots,” *Marketplace*, August 24, 2020, <https://www.marketplace.org/2020/08/24/wall-street-record-high-belies-widening-gap-between-investor-haves-and-have-nots/>.

<sup>308</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., “The Other America,” *Grosse Pointe Historical Society*, accessed July 9, 2020, <https://www.gphistorical.org/mlk/mlkspeech/mlk-gp-speech.pdf>.

“two Americas” exist—those in the immigrant or undocumented community and those who are of European descent and citizens of the United States: those with status and those with no status, those with power and those with little to no power, those with means and those without. It could also be argued that more “Americas” exist given the racial, socioeconomic, educational disparities across the nation. Immigrants, particularly from Central and South America, are significantly affected by the restrictive policies of immigration set forth by the United States government. Too often, these communities are relegated to live, work, and exist in the shadows for fear of law enforcement or racism that is prevalent within the United States. This further makes the struggle of the immigrant community more difficult to name, speak to, or assist.

Churches operate within these different “Americas” with church members working or serving across the various social and economic stratifications found within American society. These artificial lines bind the church’s thinking, actions, and ministries. They confine ministry and movements to only seek out service to those who are most like the congregation. Many churches today are still segregated by racial divisions.<sup>309</sup> Is this because ministers do not have the resources to navigate racial issues or is it something else? The DOC is part of the “restoration movement” which has its foundations in all people being welcomed, accepted, and loved. Can the movement continue if churches and ministries solely reflect a single racial makeup? It is incumbent on communities of faith to look past skin color and social location and widen the circles of embrace and care. Being too focused on one’s own race limits the movement of God’s spirit. Jesus the Christ was clear that the abundant life given was not just for the people of Israel rather the entire world. Therefore, how then is the church operating within these “Americas”?

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<sup>309</sup> Tom Gjelten, “Multiracial Congregations May Not Bridge Racial Divide,” *National Public Radio*, July 17, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/07/17/891600067/multiracial-congregations-may-not-bridge-racial-divide>.

how can Christ's law, light, wholeness, and redemption be found? Can ministers, as the ones interviewed in this project, look past these lines and divisions to offer a new way, a new path, a new understanding of community? The church is called to offer hope in a time of desperation, to bring forth and bear witness to the Good News of Jesus the Christ.

Pope Francis has argued that "loving our neighbor means feeling compassion for the sufferings of our brothers and sisters, drawing close to them, touching their sores and sharing their stories, and thus manifesting concretely God's tender love for them. This means being a neighbor to all those who are mistreated and abandoned on the streets of our world, soothing their wounds, and bringing them to the nearest shelter, where their needs can be met."<sup>310</sup> If we are not aware of the different "Americas" that are within our towns and cities, then how is the church to respond? Given the complex nature of the United States immigration system, how does a single local congregation make a meaningful impact? What then are ministers to do when faced with the issue of immigration, human exploitation, trafficking, or policies that are not life honoring or giving to the "other" or the "stranger"? How do they navigate this world?

As ministers of the gospel of Jesus the Christ, there needs to be an awareness of the "other," those who are on the outside of society's norms and conditions. Throughout the Law of Moses, the words of the prophets, the Gospels, and the epistles of the New Testament, there is an echo of remembering the outsiders and those who are vulnerable to undue harm and persecution. Some have argued that Christians today would support the immigration of Jesus himself if they knew he was at the Southern US border. This notion then raises the question if all of humanity is made in God's image and this image is being denied care, food, shelter, water, and protection,

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<sup>310</sup> O'Connell, "Pope Francis Reminds Christians That Migrants and Refugees Should Be Welcomed Around the World,"

then why is this continuing to happen? The Epistle of James reminds the church that “Anyone, then, who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin” (4:17). The Church, at its core and found within the holy scriptures, contends that humanity must care for one another. Therefore, a church community may feel empathy for immigrants but feel powerless to know what to do next. The call and command of Jesus the Christ is simple: love your neighbor and find ways to enact the radical hospitality of Christ to all people, including immigrants.

### Ministry Today

Ministers across the country are entering pulpits proclaiming the good news of Jesus the Christ, trying to connect ancient stories to modern times as well as have a response to the issues that are plaguing communities, their state, nation, and world. It is a monumental task for one person to bear at times; it is difficult to balance the stresses of ministry with the issues outside the church walls. While it might be an arduous task, I believe ministers need to find a way to give a response to the issues that are happening around them. Simply ignoring the problem will not make it go away; while we might forget about it and move on to another issue or “hot topic,” issues like immigration cannot be ignored anymore. The gospel of Christ demands an answer, a response. The tradition of the church universal teaches the inherent worth and value of all of humanity. It is on the shoulders of this teaching that this issue falls. The connection between the sacred pages of the Bible and the 21<sup>st</sup> century must be made with respect to immigration in many communities. Immigrants cannot be relegated to the halls of capitol buildings for politicians to decide who is in and who is out. The message of the Gospel is strong and clear; Jesus the Christ’s coming was for all people to have life and have it to the fullest (Jn. 10:10). This view is shown by loving our neighbor as ourselves, as articulated in Mark 12:31 and elsewhere. If today’s immigration policy and the muted response of Christians has told the world anything, is

that either Christians do not care about the plight of the immigrant or that they are unsure of what to do; this is seen particularly by Christians allowing families to be separated at the US Southern border (regardless of presidential administrations) and refugee or asylum claims continuing to be denied. If Christians are called to be the light of the world as stated in Matthew 5, then the light of grace, peace, hope, love, and liberty is growing slowly dimmer. If answers cannot come from Austin or Washington DC, then the church has the responsibility to make a way, a path for the righteous to see how they are called to stand in the gap; “Religious communities are perhaps uniquely capable of addressing the ethical dimensions of people on the move. Migration plays a key role in the founding narratives of many world religions. Jews, Christians, and Muslims are all descendants of the Patriarch Abraham, whose experience of God’s call led him to migrate from the home of his kinsfolk to the land of Canaan.”<sup>311</sup>

Wrapped up in all of this, ministers are balancing life, work, a prophetic call, and even worries regarding income and decline of church membership. While this is true on any issue, ministers in Texas are being called to respond to the needs of those in the immigration system and its significant backlog. Now more than ever, the pressure placed on ministers is tremendous. A study found that “as many as 70 percent of pastors regularly consider leaving [their current ministry position], and many of them actually quit.”<sup>312</sup> This was heightened at the peak of the infection rate of COVID-19 around the country. Many areas of the United States enacted shelter in place orders and/or restricted in-person gatherings in an effort to control the spread of the disease. Because of this, many ministers’ job descriptions and avenues of ministry changed,

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<sup>311</sup> David Hollenbach, SJ, “Migration as a Challenge for Theological Ethics,” *Political Theology* 12,110. 6 (2011): 808.

<sup>312</sup> Anugrah Kumar, “Nearly 3 in 4 Pastors Regularly Consider Leaving Due to Stress, Study Finds,” *The Christian Post*, June 21, 2014, <https://www.christianpost.com/news/nearly-3-in-4-pastors-regularly-consider-leaving-due-to-stress-study-finds.html>.

almost overnight.<sup>313</sup> Some ministers are too focused on the decline of their congregation, the condition of the building, and the decrease in budgets and spending to feel that “taking on” immigration is a viable option. While the effects of the decline of Christianity in the United States are far-reaching, it does not preclude Christian congregations of any size from engaging in conversations, ministries, and learning around this issue that affects millions of people, with some of the immigrants participating in churches, serving on boards, and teaching Bible classes.

Immigration is a topic that is not going to be solved overnight, nor will it leave the religious and political spheres. Ministers are being looked to for answers, guidance, and a word from the Holy Scriptures on issues that matter to them and to all of humanity. The United States is not the only country having conversations and debates about immigration, migration, refugees, and asylum seekers. An underlying issue surrounding immigration is race, which is socially constructed and defined.<sup>314</sup> This is an issue that might not have prominence within the local congregation. Immigration and race are inseparable. As noted, many of the United States’ immigration policies were and are built and established on racist foundations or presumptions. Therefore, immigration cannot just be viewed as gatekeeping but as an intersection of multiple issues and layers of systemic problems and concerns.

Today, there is a heightened awareness of the role that race places in social policy and theological constructs. It should not be overlooked that, in the history of the United States, immigration policy and enforcement have been constructed from a pro-European descent framework. Thus, “efforts to exclude and deport Mexican citizens from the United States, which

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<sup>313</sup> Tess Schoonhoven, “Pastors Face Mental Health Challenges Amid Covid-19 Pandemic,” The Christian Index, April 17, 2020, <https://christianindex.org/pastors-mental-health-covid-19-pandemic/>.

<sup>314</sup> Jennifer Harvey, *Dear White Christians: For those Still Longing for Racial Reconciliation* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 45.

accelerated over the course of the twentieth century, tell much about how [US American] society generally views Mexican American citizens.”<sup>315</sup> This notion of “imperial racism” is prevalent in the United States to this day.<sup>316</sup> Ministers and followers of Christ are called to examine how the interplay of racialization and society are being constructed. All of the ministers interviewed for this project were of European descent and most served communities that reflected their racial makeup. By not acknowledging the racial structures around them, European-descent ministers are living into a “race-neutral” position. This can lead to feeding “White nationalist victimhood by positing the notion that any policy protecting or advancing non-White [*sic*] Americans toward equity is ‘reverse discrimination.’”<sup>317</sup> Ministers are finding themselves ministering in communities and municipalities where racialization is taking place and laws are being constructed based on race, but they feel as if their hands are tied or they do not know what the next steps are to adequately address the issue of immigration in a theological manner. Immigration, race, economics, poverty, and human rights are all found within this one issue. Trying to find answers to “what can be done?” can be difficult, however, there is an understanding from many people that something needs to be done and that a Christian response can and should be formulated.

### **What Can Be Done?**

A refrain throughout this project has been what can be done? What can a minister or church community do? Drawing from this study, I believe that ministers can utilize various

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<sup>315</sup> Kevin R. Johnson, "Race, the Immigration Laws, and Domestic Race Relations: A "Magic Mirror" into the Heart of Darkness," *Indiana Law Journal*: Vol. 73 : Iss. 4 , Article 2., 1113.

<sup>316</sup> M Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being*, Innovations (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 66.

<sup>317</sup> Ibram X. Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist* (New York: One World, 2019), 20.



methods, tools, and outlooks to increase awareness of immigration in their congregations, regardless of location in the United States.

The Reverend Dr. William Barber, II, DOC Minister in North Carolina and co-founder of the Poor People's Campaign, calls for the rejected of society to come together.<sup>318</sup> There is a sense that change happens when people who have power or social capital use their privilege to affect change. Those with privilege and power must be aware of how that power is being used and who is it is affecting and how the need to help, fix, and amend can shift their views and outcome unintentionally. Those of European Descent must continually question their motives when acting. For example, there is a concept called "the white savior." This is when a person of European descent believes that they alone can offer help because they deem the group they are assisting cannot attain their goal without them and their support; they are speaking for the community, not speaking with them. Many of the biggest critiques of this thought come from European-descent people working in Africa. Teju Cole offers this perspective, "could a well-meaning [US] American "help" a place like Uganda today? It begins, I believe, with some humility with regards to the people in those places. It begins with some respect for the agency of the people of Uganda in their own lives. A great deal of work had been done, and continues to be done, by Ugandans to improve their own country, and ignorant comments (I've seen many) about how 'we have to save them because they can't save themselves' can't change that fact."<sup>319</sup> In an effort to be helpful and name injustices, the voices and experiences of those in the immigrant

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<sup>318</sup> Reverend Dr. William J. Barber II, *We Are Called to Be a Movement* (New York: Workman Publishing Co., Inc., 2020), 75-76.

<sup>319</sup> Teju Cole, "The White-Savior Industrial Complex," *The Atlantic*, March 21, 2012, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/the-white-savior-industrial-complex/254843/>.

community could and have been silenced. Ministers, particularly of European descent, must regularly examine their motivations and causes when doing the vital work of justice.

This notion, however, is one that is debated in scholarly and theological circles. Theologian Miguel De La Torre, for example, believes that the entire structure of society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is built on the premise of European dominance and power. It is specifically built to enhance the power and position of those of European descent only.<sup>320</sup> While people of color can find success and/or “the American Dream,” it is a more challenging and more tenuous struggle than compared to those of European descent. The expectation, therefore, of white privilege believes that “those on the margins exist to serve the center, understood, in [De La Torre’s] case, as being at the beck and call of any whites who happen to be Latinx-curious at the moment.”<sup>321</sup>

For sure, the biblical text spoke and guided the ministers to the notion of hospitality. This was a clear theme in all the interviews for this project. How this hospitality is shown, expressed, and presented to a community of faith is key to connecting faith and life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It raises important questions such as “how is hospitality shown in communities that are different than my dominant culture?” “What is the church’s role in supporting those who are ‘outside of the law?’” What can hospitality look like? How can this hospitality be shown in a way that is heard as apolitical? It has been said that the gospel is political, but it is not partisan. This message of the faithful responding to an issue or situation versus pushing an agenda or political party talking points needs more attention within the Christian church community. Bridging the gap between politics and faith is a daunting task as this project has shown.

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<sup>320</sup> De La Torre, *Burying White Privilege: Resurrecting a Badass Christianity*, 43-44.

<sup>321</sup> Ibid., 45.

Ministers need to speak from a biblically informed perspective that shows that caring for immigrants, those experiencing homelessness, those in poverty or on the margins of society are not political endorsements but part of the Christian tradition. It is one of faithful action and living. Politics and political party stances are not a religion, but people treat them that way. They have been converted into an idol, something that should drive our attention and action. Ministers today are fighting against this idol notion when entering the pulpit, preparing for a Bible study, or even posting opinions or comments on social media.

What tools are at the minister's disposal for addressing immigration in their ministry context? Can or should politics be interjected into worship and Bible studies? This project has shown that there is a need for ministers to be equipped to offer a Christian response to issues plaguing communities and states. While the desire is there, ministers are lacking the tools and resources to guide congregations or Christian communities in the work of naming and addressing systemic issues such as immigration.

### Tools for Ministry

There are many tools at a minister's disposal to help them in this task of navigating politics and faith around the issue of immigration. To start, I believe ministers need to introduce immigration as a religious and humanitarian issue, not a political one. Too often, the conversation of immigration becomes about economics and less focused on the humanitarian crisis that surrounds the current United States immigration policy. A common question posed is, "how are we (the United States via taxpayer dollars) going to pay for increased immigration?" Generally, this line of questioning is coming from a place that sees immigrants as a "drain on the

system” or merely coming to the United States to “live off the government.”<sup>322</sup> While this has been shown in numerous studies not to be the case, it is still a topic of inquiry.<sup>323</sup> This type of thinking dehumanizes the immigrant as someone who is coming to steal what is deemed “rightfully America’s.” Much like colonizers under the guise of Manifest Destiny, there is an ideal that is pervasive in the United States that the holding or dispensing of goods and services should be to Americans first. This idea harkens to an ideal first popularized in the early twentieth century by President Woodrow Wilson, “America for the Americans first” or more simply (and popularized today by former President Donald J. Trump), “America First.”<sup>324</sup> This simplistic view of immigration comes from a position that views immigrants as merely moving between countries and fails to recognize immigration is about finding life in the new country.<sup>325</sup>

This idea fails to acknowledge that immigrants come to the United States for a variety of reasons: to be educated, start businesses, and spend money in local economies. Some are trying to flee persecution or threats made on their lives. Immigrants are people who are looking for the same freedoms and protections that many US Americans take for granted every day, the ones that are granted to us by virtue of being a citizen in the Constitution. Why would these protections not be granted to others who come to the United States seeking refuge or a more full and prosperous life?

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<sup>322</sup> Annie Lowrey, “Are Immigrants a Drain On Government Resources? The Trump administration’s argument for denying green cards to immigrant families is based on faulty math.,” *The Atlantic*, September 29, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/09/are-immigrants-drain-government-resources/571582/>.

<sup>323</sup> Ibid.

<sup>324</sup> Eric Rauchway, “How ‘America First’ Got Its Nationalistic Edge,” *The Atlantic*, May 6, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/05/william-randolph-hearst-gave-america-first-its-nationalist-edge/481497/>.

<sup>325</sup> Carroll R., *Christians at the Border: Immigration, the Church, and the Bible*, 52.

Ministers today, especially in the South, should be aware that this characterization of immigrants and the “America First” policies and mentality immediately place US Americans as superior to anyone else. US Americans, politicians, lobbyists, and lawmakers have become the gatekeepers; they are the ones who control the purse strings. They make the decisions on who can or cannot have access to the tax dollars given for the support of programs and services. Currently, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) spends \$133.99 per adult per day in one of their detention facilities; the cost of tent cities is almost \$800 per person per night.<sup>326</sup>

At its core, the question of payment is one of economics that is centered around the idea of abundance and scarcity. There is an implicit question being asked as well; wedged in between this albeit small empathy for those trying to immigrate to the United States through harsh conditions is the question “how much of an inconvenience will this produce? How will my life be impacted by the helping of immigrants?” These questions are the wrong place to start this conversation. On the surface, these questions acknowledge that there is a problem with the immigration system and laws in our country. There is an acknowledgment that something needs to be done, but many people are unable to construct or formulate a response. Many people do not have the information or theological foundation to make a cogent response. This comes from the lack of direct action and speaking to a problem, especially from people of power in theological circles.

However, this postulation is not the place from which meaningful conversations and action start. A better, more inclusive, albeit more Christian, response and question is, “how did we get here?” By reframing this question, Christians are removing themselves from the equation.

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<sup>326</sup> Jaden Urbi, “This Is How Much It Costs to Detain an Immigrant in the Us,” CNBC News, January 20, 2018, <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/06/20/cost-us-immigrant-detention-trump-zero-tolerance-tents-cages.html>.

In this paradigm, the one asking the question is placing the needs, wants, desires, dignity, and agency of the immigrant population ahead of their own. This radical shift and change in perspective is what Jesus the Christ argues for throughout the Gospel. The way that immigrants are treated and the immigration laws that enforce these beliefs and actions are a “helpful gauge for measuring [the United States] nation's racial sensibilities.”<sup>327</sup>

Christians are called to empathize and care for the immigrant in their midst. However, 21<sup>st</sup> century United States economics sees caring for others as dismissing the rules and response of the majority. This understanding is best seen when people of European descent view movements such as Black Lives Matter (BLM) as being an “anti-white” movement or that by their existence “white lives” do not matter. Care for immigrants does not mean that those in poverty or who are low in wealth in the United States do not matter. Rather, the immigrant population should matter just as much as citizens of the United States. Both can be held in tension. Both can have faithful responses. Both should cause the church and Christians to examine economic policies and laws and how they are affecting the dignity of humanity. The problem with the intersection of politics and faith is that one can come to believe that the answers found are binary.<sup>328</sup>

There is a tug of war happening within the hearts of some Christians. They want to help, but they also want to make sure that *their* needs (economics and way of life) are cared for first; if there is enough for people to be cared for, then the question of helping others can be asked. This mindset is an easy one to slip into but also one that runs counter to the message found throughout

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<sup>327</sup> Johnson, "Race, the Immigration Laws, and Domestic Race Relations", 1148.

<sup>328</sup> Holland and Beth Silvers, *I Think You're Wrong (but I'm Listening)*, 79.

the Bible; there is enough in God's kingdom for everyone. Old Testament scholar Walter Bruggeman articulated this notion when he wrote:

Wouldn't it be wonderful if liberal and conservative church people, who love to quarrel with each other, came to a common realization that the real issue confronting us is whether the news of God's abundance can be trusted in the face of the story of scarcity? What we know in the secret recesses of our hearts is that the story of scarcity is a tale of death. And the people of God counter this tale by witnessing to the manna. There is a more excellent bread than crass materialism. It is the bread of life and you don't have to bake it. As we walk into the new millennium, we must decide where our trust is placed.<sup>329</sup>

In other words, it is a frame of mind and an attitude of the heart. Believing that there is "enough to go around" is an act of faithfulness. It is a declaration that the needs of all will be cared for within God's realm. Time and time again, the abundance of God has been shown in the biblical record. Whether it is manna from Heaven (Ex. 16), the widow's pantry being filled (1Kings 16), or overflowing baskets of fish and bread (Matt. 14:13-21), there is enough to go around. For example, the world has enough food to ensure all people have enough to survive, however, there is an access problem. On top of that the rise of global climate change is affecting how communities grow crops year around.<sup>330</sup> If the church lives into the fear of scarcity, it will begin to align itself with policies and programs that could potentially limit assistance out of a desire of self-preservation.

Today, this fear is being played out in politics and economic structures that the United States is built upon. Even though the United States is the most prosperous nation in the world, politicians still believe the falsity that there is not enough to go around; programs that were

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<sup>329</sup> Walter Brueggemann, "The Liturgy of Abundance, the Myth of Scarcity," *The Christian Century*, March 24, 1999, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2012-01/liturgy-abundance-myth-scarcity>.

<sup>330</sup> <https://www.worldvision.com.au/global-issues/work-we-do/famine/why-are-so-many-people-in-the-world-hungry>

created to support those in need or facing hardships, programs such as SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families), WIC (Women Infants and Children), and other food stamp/voucher programs are being cut in order to “save tax dollars.”<sup>331</sup> These dollars are shuffled around the budget to fill shortfalls and to support other measures that are deemed more essential than providing basic needs for people in the country. For example, in February 2020, President Trump proposed a \$4.8 billion national budget. In it, he asked for increases to border security and military and defense contracts. By doing so, he also asked for “deep cuts to student loan assistance, affordable housing efforts, food stamps, and Medicaid.”<sup>332</sup> Essential takes on a new meaning where it supports the wealthy and pushes aside the poor. Budgets are theological documents; although the federal government is not a theological institution or a theocracy, the budget that is set forth by the presiding administration speak to the priorities and emphasis for the upcoming year. Where tax dollars are spent and who they benefit signals to the country, its citizens, and those trying to immigrate to the United States where the priorities of the government (both state and federal) lie. When more money is spent on military contracts than education, Housing and Urban Development, food assistance programs, or immigration, it is an indication that some groups, ideas, and policies are more “important” than others. Ministers and followers of Christ should be able to examine federal, state, and local budgets to see where the shortfalls are taking place. Therefore, a theological response will be needed to ask important questions about the dignity of humanity in their community or nation. For example, why is it acceptable to have \$2 billion allocated to a

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<sup>331</sup> Jeff Stein and Erica Werner, “Trump Proposes \$4.8 Trillion Election-Year Budget With Big Domestic Cuts”, accessed October 31, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/02/09/trump-budget-plan-would-fail-eliminate-deficit-over-10-years-briefing-document-shows/>.

<sup>332</sup> Jim Tankersley et al., “Trump’s \$4.8 Trillion Budget Would Cut Safety Net Programs and Boost Defense,” *The New York Times*, February 10, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/10/business/president-trump-budget-cuts.html>.



wall on the Southern US border while at the same time cutting Medicare and Medicaid payments and disbursements?<sup>333</sup> What is being taught or learned from a theological perspective when the “stranger” is maligned to a line item with limited resources?

It is a theological statement to welcome the stranger, to honor the immigrant, without the pretense that they are going to misuse public funds or even have nefarious, malicious intents for coming to the United States. Seeing people as children of God humanizes them. In the dehumanization process, it is easier for people to make grand generalizations, which are often false or at least exaggerated in order to have a moral justification for withholding basic needs. This places a barrier and distance between these groups. Due to this separation, immediate needs do not have to be addressed quickly or at all. This is shown in the Trump administration’s detention centers at the Southern US Border. These facilities are off-limits to outsiders, religious or mission organizations, and non-governmental groups (NGO). It is the assumption that if the “problem” is away or distant, then not responding adequately or at all is deemed appropriate. The harshness of this notion is that the people are made in the Image of God and are being locked away and forgotten. Since the US has dehumanized immigrants to a slurry of names, then it makes it easier for some to reconcile their faith with their politics. The church and Christians are called to listen to these cries and address them without hesitation or reservation. This echoes Matthew 25 when Jesus the Christ states “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

Dehumanizing people places our needs, our wants, and our desires above the needs of those seeking our help, attention, or care. It is through this dehumanizing tactic that many

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<sup>333</sup> Stein and Werner, “Trump Proposes \$4.8 Trillion Election-Year Budget With Big Domestic Cuts”

people excuse the behavior of state and federal administrations. If someone can strip away a person's humanity, dignity, and worthiness, then it is much simpler to reject their cries for help and services. If an immigrant is viewed merely as a "thug," "rapist,"<sup>334</sup> or "murderer," then strong enforcement policies that affect those who are not criminals are viewed as normative. This is not just taking place in the United States of America; rather it is happening across Europe as well. Extremist groups (of the ethno-nationalist type) are calling for stricter immigration laws and policies under the guise that immigrants are "'congenital criminals, lepers, thieves, unclean,' 'garbage,' 'animals,' 'predators,' 'testosterone bombs,' and worse.'"<sup>335</sup> This view of immigration is a clear rejection of humanity and antithetical to the message of Christ and the teachings of the Church universal.

Ministers, thus, can use the biblical record to reframe how people are viewed in light of immigration. For example, Jesus the Christ did not minister, heal, and teach in Judea alone. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus is shown to go beyond Judea as well to have many interactions with persons who were not of noble status, social popularity, or even cultural acceptance. This type of boundary-breaking teaches the inherent worth and dignity of every person. If this is true and people are not being treated equitably, fairly, or humanely, then there is an opportunity for a response to take shape from a church, ministry, or community. There is a biblical foundation on which the church can draw from to shed light on this important topic. By framing the issue of immigration as a religious, moral, human-centric ideal, then it is more difficult for detractors to

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<sup>334</sup> Michelle Mark, "Trump Just Referred to One of His Most Infamous Campaign Comments: Calling Mexicans 'rapists'," *Business Insider*, April 5, 2018, <https://www.businessinsider.com/trump-mexicans-rapists-remark-reference-2018-4>.

<sup>335</sup> Beverly Crawford Ames, "The Dehumanization of Immigrants and the Rise of the Extreme Right," American Institute for Contemporary German Studies: Johns Hopkins, September 11, 2019, <https://www.aicgs.org/publication/the-dehumanization-of-immigrants-and-the-rise-of-the-extreme-right/>.

raise objections. This does not mean, however, that arguments will be made in which the care and respect of an immigrant are lost, but it is incumbent for a minister of the Gospel of Jesus the Christ to reframe these issues in a way that a community will be willing to hear and acknowledge.

This also allows followers of Christ to begin to critique the situation through a theological hermeneutic. This type of examination is one that will take time, effort, and a willingness from the congregants to hear perspectives and ideals that might be different than previously held beliefs and arguments. There is a strong potential to have dissonance when someone begins the difficult yet meaningful work of analyzing faith and the world. This is not a time to push certain political structures or ideals, instead, it is a time of learning, relearning, and examining how faith and politics interact.

Too often, the notion of faith and politics is segregated into two different mindsets, with some people arguing that their faith does inform their politics while others disagree. Placing the immigration policies and practices alongside the biblical record provides for a deeper understanding of what is called for by people of faith. The comparative approach highlights the “aporias” in these policies toward the Other. This type of learning and teaching could be a risky move for a minister and the church, but particularly in Disciples of Christ congregations, the notion of freedom of belief and the idea of learning and faith development across the life cycle is paramount. Thus, I would argue that such an approach must begin by establishing a mutual trust between the minister and the congregation, followed by the congregation learning its own history, and slowly learning to “read” the biblical text critically by “hearing” the minister read the text (i.e., sermons) critically.

There is, however, a sense of complacency within the modern church;<sup>336</sup> every day, the most basic needs of society's most vulnerable are not being met in the United States. In the most prosperous nation in the world, how is it that 1 in 4 children in Texas is food insecure or that immigrants are facing rejection and racism? Labberton argues that hearts are difficult to change, but that is exactly the central point of the Gospel.<sup>337</sup> Calling people to change is not a task many ministers want to do. However, ministers across the country are facing this complacency regularly. The gospel is more than nice stories and platitudes; therefore hearts, minds, systems, and structures must change. The work of moving and showing Christians who may be operating within an embedded theological framework is a difficult task. However, I believe that merely talking around the issue (any issue that is pressing or goes against the stated purpose of the gospel) allows for Christians to rationalize their way out of direct action. These conversations will shed light on how engrained our thinking has become and how sometimes our reasons and beliefs are not grounded in theology but rather in a political party's talking points or narratives. The Church must name injustices when they happen; they must name the pain and the loss of dignity that is taking place with respect to immigrants and their conditions at the Southern US border. This is not a political statement (albeit it might be heard that way from some), rather it is at the heart of the journey with Jesus the Christ, at the heart of the gospel message of love, inclusion, and life-honoring grace. While many ministers may understand this cognitively, the reluctance to move and name systems of oppression is stifling the witness of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century church. Only twenty percent of Americans "have faith in the church and its role in our national

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<sup>336</sup> Mark Labberton, *The Dangerous Act of Loving Your Neighbor: Seeing Others through the Eyes of Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2010), 26.

<sup>337</sup> Ibid.

life.”<sup>338</sup> This sentiment can be changed, I believe, if Christians and ministers are willing to speak truth to power and begin the hard work of dismantling dangerous theologies and ideologies and examining issues like immigration, education, and poverty theologically, not politically. This move will serve as a solid footing to begin to address issues facing our nation as well as in local communities.

### Within Worship

Worship is a key event in the life of a Christian. Gathering to praise, pray, and learn helps Christians begin to hear how faith and life intersect. A minister can introduce the issue of immigration in worship using sermons, litanies, and hymn selections. This does not mean that a sermon must critique the current administration’s policy of family separation point by point, rather it can focus on outsiders, wandering, the other, welcoming, and God’s family. Through this homiletical device, a minister is reframing ancient stories to show how welcoming the stranger means all people regardless of place of origin, the love of God was not exclusive for Israel, and that followers of Christ are called to see and act differently in the world. Making this connection will take careful reflection and presentation. A minister will have to know her/his congregational makeup. It is risky to have a sermon that “sounds” political, but, framed within the biblical record, a minister has a solid position to start from.

By introducing non-English hymns or hymns by contemporary non-European musicians, the worship experience is interjected with the fullness of God’s realm. By trying these new approaches, the congregation can experience a new way of understanding God and how various cultures and nationalities view God, Jesus, etc. This will allow the congregation to become more

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<sup>338</sup> Holland and Silvers, *I Think You’re Wrong*, 72.

aware of God's presence in other places of the world outside of their local or national context. Some congregations do a good job of this; however, for a conversation and discussion about immigration outside of the political sphere, there has to be a tangible connection for people. Minds and hearts are not going to be changed overnight; the message of inclusivity and welcome must be a theme throughout many congregations focusing on the issue of immigration. Some important voices in this area include Mark Miller, African American hymn writer and composer, and C. Michael Hawn. Hawn compiled music from around the world in his text *Halle, Halle: We Sing the World Round*. He argues "singing and praying globally is a dangerous business. If you choose to sing and pray locally with global vision, your worship may never be the same. How might the intentional and consistent use of world song affect our theology?"<sup>339</sup>

Being able to show that the Bible is central to our conversations about life and faith is vitally important for a minister. In the act of worship, a minister can craft an order of worship that begins to highlight the ways that humanity throughout the biblical record has been mandated from God to bring wholeness in a world that is fractured. For Jesus the Christ, he expands this notion by declaring that all people are welcomed in the Kingdom of God and thus all of God's children are deemed holy. Translating an ancient text with its various cultural references and structures to a 21<sup>st</sup>-century Christian community will take time and effort. Still, it is essential that it is done in a way that holds on to the validity of human dignity and love. An example of a litany that could be used in worship to highlight the importance of welcoming others is as follows.

**Leader:** We are welcomed here by God

**People:** For all are created in the Image of God

**Leader:** Jesus reminds us that welcoming a stranger, an immigrant, a sojourner is to welcome him.

**People:** For all are created in the Image of God

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<sup>339</sup> C. Michael Hawn, *Halle, Halle: We Sing the World Round* (Garland, Texas: Choristers Guild, 1999), 4.

**Leader:** Let us seek God in this time of worship and ask the Holy Spirit to mold and reshape our hearts to always be reminded that  
**People:** All are created in the Image of God<sup>340</sup>

The DOC has a denominational hymnal, *Chalice Hymnal*, which contains several hymns from non-European descent writers as well as non-English hymns. They include: “Santo, Santo, Santo” (Hymn 111), “Tú Has Vendio a la Orilla” (Hymn 342), “Wade in the Water” (Hymn 371), and “Sois la Semilla” (Hymn 478). These, among many others, will highlight how the spirit of God is moving and operating in other cultures than those of European descent, in places other than the United States, and in other languages than English.

Some stories a minister could highlight include: Mary and Joseph coming to Bethlehem and finding shelter from the innkeeper (Lk. 2:1–5), the Good Samaritan (Lk. 10:25–37), and the numerous accounts of ancient Israel’s belief that God’s community was united regardless of background and nationality. The World Council of Churches in 2010 issued a report on migration and immigration from a theological and action perspective. They highlighted eight different scriptures that express a theological grounding for action and grace for immigrants and migrants in the world. They include “...no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female all are one in Christ” (Galatians 3:28), “...a house of prayer for all peoples (Isaiah 56:7b), “a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language... (Revelation 7:9).”<sup>341</sup>

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<sup>340</sup> Litany written by Rev. Evan M. Dolive, M.Div.

<sup>341</sup> World Council of Churches, “Report of the World Council of Churches (WCC) Consultation on Mission and Ecclesiology of the Migrant Churches,” *International Review of Mission* 100, no. 1 (2011): 107.

The Bible is central to worship in a Christian community. Thus, a minister must utilize it with grace and care. It is important for a minister not to insert their interpretation into a text to make the text read how they would like. This eisegesis is dangerous when approaching the biblical record. Thus, “every reading is subjective in the sense that the way we use interpretive methodologies is shaped by who and why we are interpreting the text.”<sup>342</sup>

### Latinx Theologians

One thing that was absent from the ministerial interviews was the presence of Latinx voices. None of the ministers interviewed named a Latinx theologian as foundational in their understanding of immigration and the Bible. Therefore, another way to continue this conversation is to read more from Latinx theologians. Theologians such as Miguel De La Torre, Fernando F. Segovia, Gustavo Gutierrez, Daisy Machado, Francisco Lozada, Jr. and others help to broaden our view of the world and God. While many ministers of European descent may not have the experience as some Latinx theologians, it does speak to the importance of allowing other’s viewpoints and perspectives to be heard and amplified. By hearing their theological and interpretive perspective, it allows the minister to consider the ways their thinking and hermeneutics have been formed and shaped by European and/or American thinking and biases. By showing a congregation, particularly one that is primarily of European descent, that other views of God are important, the minister is stating that God can be known in a variety of valid and important ways. Latinx voices are needed in this space to help bridge the gap that can be found in a European-descent minister’s theological education and training. They are able to provide needed clarity and perspective that no other group can offer.

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<sup>342</sup> O. Wesley Allen, *Reading the Synoptic Gospels: Basic Methods for Interpreting Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2000), 3.



## Hearing Stories

One direct way for congregations to begin their journey of understanding more about immigration in their nation or community is to begin to listen to immigrant stories. Personalizing the experience of an immigrant humanizes the situation. This allows an immigrant not to be viewed in the abstract but be viewed as a human being trying to come to the United States for safety, opportunity, or a better life for themselves or their family. For example, Zarka Shabir, an immigrant from India, wrote about her experience coming to the United States; she writes, “No one tells you how your experience as an immigrant will begin with acknowledging yourself as less. You are a brown woman waiting in line at JFK, fumbling to make sure your papers are in order, wondering whether your name is too jagged, too Muslim, that it won’t roll off their tongue. You watch as people with fairer skin pass you by. Global Entry, they will say, for the “pre-approved, low-risk.” Remember: They said global, not equal.”<sup>343</sup> If the story of Shabir was condensed to the idea that she just wanted a better life or to rob the system, then the complexity and the injustices of the current United States immigration system and the prevailing racialization in the US American culture would be lost. Her voice would have been lost and she would have been lumped together with all of the other immigrants who are just “coming to the US for a better way of life.”

By personalizing the immigrant’s journey, struggle, and experience, it humanizes them and highlights the dehumanizing policies and racist tendencies that are taking place in the United States, many of which go unnoticed by many people, churches, or news organizations. By amplifying the voices of the immigrant, in turn, we are honoring their humanity and

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<sup>343</sup> Zakra Shabir, “What 8 People Want You to Know About Immigration in America,” Repeller Magazine, January 25, 2018, <https://repeller.com/immigration-stories>.

acknowledge their God-given right to move in the world freely. If by policies, procedures or otherwise, this is being restricted, then the church and all followers of Christ have an obligation to see that humanity is cared for. It takes knowing the story, putting a face with a journey, that will allow hearts to be opened and changed as well as the deep interconnection of faith in the world today. The focus of this type of engagement is to join the immigrant on their journey. As it has been shown many times, not all migrants are coming to the United States to engage in nefarious affairs. By seeing that the road to enter the United States is paved with treacherous paths, “coyotes” (people who smuggle immigrants into the United States for money), and harsh conditions, then a more empathetic response can be formulated. Disciples of Christ churches across the country support Disciples Immigration, which works out of the national office in Indianapolis, and, especially in Texas, Southwest Good Samaritan Ministries in Los Fresnos, Texas. These ministries can be a starting point for hearing immigrants’ voices.

### Struggles Within A Congregation

One problem that congregations may face is the idea that they themselves must have all the answers or a viable solution to make an impact. It is not the job of the local Christian church to formulate federal immigration policy; however, it is the job of the local Christian church to ensure that all policies that are being enacted on the federal and state level are honoring of what the main message of the biblical record is: all are humans. It is part of US America’s post-Enlightenment mentality that stunts learning, growth, and action. Too many times, Christian ministries fail to get started because congregations want to see the result before beginning. This inhibits the movement of the Holy Spirit and provides a safe alternative to not acting on issues.

One question that is raised in response to a congregation or Christians engaging in how best to serve those in need via immigration is “why this issue?” For ministers in Texas in

particular (and across the Southern US Borderlands) immigration is an inevitable topic of conversation due to the proximity to Mexico. Stating that immigrants have worth and value does not diminish the worth and value of others who are struggling and suffering. It also does not mean that a church should only focus on one issue. A critique of this outlook is that a majority of the work and ministry that is completed in a local congregation is handled by a minority of its members. Therefore, there may not be enough time, resources, or energy to focus on immigration. A minister then should connect the quandary of immigration in light of other issues. Immigration is a combination of other factors that merge into one issue. Thus, a church might be focusing on something that also has a connection to immigration, and they might not even know it. By widening the circle of theological thought, it allows for Christian communities to fully embrace and explore their own theological biases as well as how the ministry's focuses can be one-sided and leave out others.

For church communities, connecting one's faith to life is an important task; Diehl argues that "churches that encourage people to experience their faith are alive and growing; churches that neglect this aspect are dying."<sup>344</sup> The project has shown that some communities are willing to take on some issues over others. Generally, these include homeless shelters and food banks. Immigration is such a politically charged topic that many churches or Christians do not want to take it on. The broken immigration system is hurting other humans and gives away to human trafficking and other illegal issues that Christians should be able to get behind. There is nothing political about wanting the best for all people, regardless of country of origin and language.

#### Asking Questions of Leaders and Elected Officials

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<sup>344</sup> William E. Diehl, *The Monday Connection: On Being an Authentic Christian in a Weekday World*, HarperCollins Paperback ed. (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 18.

Another way to engage with immigration in the local congregation is to examine the way that immigration and immigrants are viewed in the community in which the congregation resides. While children and families being separated at the Southern US Border is being reported in the media, this does not mean that immigrants are not struggling in cities across the country. In the United States, Latin American immigrants are continuing to experience “double segregation.” This means that Latinx immigrants coming to the United States are being segregated across racial and socioeconomic lines. This has a direct correlation to education since many areas divide cities and municipalities into areas for schooling. These areas are generally underfunded, underserved, and, given the potential mobile life of immigrant families, they have a high student turnover rate. Thus, “high-poverty, high-minority schools typically have higher dropout rates, higher student mobility, more difficulty hiring and retaining effective teachers, and lower academic achievement than more socioeconomically diverse schools.”<sup>345</sup> Additionally, some argue that immigrants face another form of segregation, making their experience in the United States one of “triple segregation;” many immigrants coming to the United States do not speak English and thereby they are faced with linguistic segregation.<sup>346</sup> Too often, children of immigrants who are required by law to attend school struggle to master the English language. There are programs for children to learn English as a second language, but research has shown that these programs fail to keep immigrant students at the same educational level as native English speakers.<sup>347</sup> Therefore, the local congregation has an opportunity to be the bridge between the immigrant community and their education. Finding ways to support immigrant

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<sup>345</sup> Janie Tankard Carnock and April Ege, “The ‘Triple Segregation’ of Latinos, ELLs: What Can We Do?,” *New America*, November 17, 2015, <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/edcentral/latinos-segregation/>.

<sup>346</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>347</sup> *Ibid.*

children through school supply drives, food drives, and tutoring after school can help children who need more assistance with their schoolwork than an educator might be able to provide. Churches can also hold English as Second Language (ESL) courses at their church for the community, and churches can also offer Spanish language classes for its congregants. This will provide tangible help for a community that often hides in the shadows. All these ministries should be done regardless of the person's legal status. Immigrants can be fearful of seeking help and assistance for fear of deportation.<sup>348</sup>

Another challenge that Latinx persons face in the United States are microaggressions which are defined as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group.”<sup>349</sup> These terms, phrases, and actions can be commonplace in a church, community, or can even happen from elected officials. Some examples of microaggressions include saying things such as “you are a credit to your race” or “when I look at you, I don’t see color.”<sup>350</sup> When these statements are said the message that is being portrayed is that people of color are not as articulate or educated as people of European descent and as well as “denying a person of color’s racial/ethnic experiences.”<sup>351</sup> This continues when people ask Latinx immigrants or Americans to “speak English” or “go back to Mexico” or “go back to your own country” or when a person of color mistaken for a service worker or as

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<sup>348</sup> MSW@USC Staff, “Facing the Fear of Deportation,” USC Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work, June 6, 2019, <https://msw.usc.edu/mswusc-blog/facing-the-fear-of-deportation/>.

<sup>349</sup> Derald Wing Sue et al., “Racial microaggressions in everyday life: Implications for Clinical Practice,” *American Psychologist* 62, no. 4: 271-86, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0003-066x.62.4.271>.

<sup>350</sup> Ibid., 276.

<sup>351</sup> Ibid.

undocumented based on their race.<sup>352</sup> Finally, microaggressions can take place in society and in the media. Some examples include “television shows and movies that feature predominantly White [*sic*] people, without representation of people of color, overcrowding of public schools in communities of color, overabundance of liquor stores in communities of color.”<sup>353</sup> For many people of European descent, these may not seem like problems or issues; however, they send messages to communities of color and immigrants when they are not addressed or are viewed as commonplace. Because of this ideology prevalent in the US American culture, immigrants can believe that they are “perpetual foreigners” even if they are citizens by birth or naturalization.<sup>354</sup> Just as many ministers are looking for ways to be more inclusive in their language for God by using non-gendered language, so too can Christians begin to name and address how language is being constructed within a community against immigration. Excuses such as “I was raised that way” or “I’m just old fashioned or old school” will not be sufficient. Ministers can begin to address how the language one uses in any context has meaning and power.

Additionally, ministers can begin to *show* their congregations how immigrants and minorities (if predominately of European descent in composition) are being treated or the living situations they are facing in their community; the goal is not to shame European descent members but have them “critically think about how oppression can be experienced spatially.”<sup>355</sup>

All these suggestions will take time and the knowledge of the community that a minister is serving. These were key factors in the interviews conducted for this project. There is a

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<sup>352</sup> Ibid., 276-277.

<sup>353</sup> Ibid., 277.

<sup>354</sup> Ibid., 281

<sup>355</sup> Cassaundra Rodriguez, “Navigating Space and Racial Microaggressions as an Undocumented Latinx Millennial,” *NCID Currents* 1, no. 1 (December), <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/currents.17387731.0001.102>.

hesitancy to speak out as not to offend or disrupt the congregation. For example, a newly called minister to a congregation may not be able to guide the community through a study or awareness of the issue of immigration at first. Knowing the theological constructs present and how “hot topics” have been and are being handled in a congregation is key to making sure that the message of inclusivity and care for the immigrant is heard and internalized. This does not mean, however, that a message of God’s love, hope, peace, reconciliation, and justice cannot still be preached, promoted, and declared within the congregation. More can be done than one thinks or believes.

Now is the time for the church to use its voice and platform to continue to seek the lost and care for the hurting. Now is the time to put theology into practice. Proclaiming the humanity, dignity, and worth of immigrants is not a political statement, it is a theological one. Politics disrupts theological discussions because politics focuses on the needs of some over others, and theology looks and cares for the needs of all people regardless of immigration status, skin color, language, country of origin. God’s realm and reign is bigger than the boundaries that humanity has placed on a map. Followers of Christ and ministers within the church universal are called to examine the ways that immigration is being handled in their jurisdiction. The *missio Dei* must continue to find a pathway in society. The DOC must then continue to speak out not just when injustices are taking place but also with theological authority and teachings to help ministers and communities navigate these often-turbulent waters. The DOC with its stance on welcome and inclusion, I believe, is the best denomination to bring more attention to local congregations and the nation. What would the DOC and local DOC congregations look like if the cries of the children being held in Mexico were not just heard but were acted upon? Churches in the DOC in the borderlands cannot bear the full load of the ministry responsibility. Immigration affects

everyone in the United States. Ministers in the DOC in Texas especially have a challenge before them. This does not mean, however, that no answer or response should be given. Faithful, honest, theologically informed positions should guide the response of the congregation. By doing so, the message of God's love and dignity of all humans will be seen and heard, a witness to the all-encompassing love and grace of God. God's love is not political, it is unconditional.



## CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

The issue of immigration is not a new topic in the history of the United States; however, it is one that is receiving more attention in the news cycles and from elected officials. How the churches chooses to address or not address this issue is paramount. Deciding to speak on an issue that is considered taboo in a church is not an option given the sociopolitical outlook and nature currently found in the US American society. The church is being looked to for guidance, answers, and reassurance. This project sheds light on how underprepared ministers feel when trying to discuss issues that are deemed political in a Christian church setting. Ministers are struggling to maintain community without potentially losing members and thus their church community. It is risky to name injustices because they can be heard in a “political” way. However, this is precisely the call of a minister of the gospel of Jesus the Christ. The DOC, I believe, can be a denominational leader in this area. By finding ways to navigate or bridge the gap between Christians across the life cycle and theological spectrum, the DOC can model for other denominations and their own communities how unity in Christ and the care for human souls is foundational to the Gospel message and can be shown in practice.

The prophet Isaiah reminded the people of ancient Israel as well as followers of Christ today that God is calling all of God’s faithful to a new way of life, to a new community.

Is not this the fast that I choose:

to loose the bonds of injustice,  
to undo the thongs of the yoke,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
and to break every yoke?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,  
and bring the homeless poor into your house;

when you see the naked, to cover them,  
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?  
Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,  
and your healing shall spring up quickly;  
your vindicator shall go before you,  
the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.  
Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;  
you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. (Is. 58:6-9)

If the words of the prophet continue to change hearts, open ears, and remember the forgotten, then the power of the Gospel will continue to change lives and transform communities. Immigration will not be solved overnight, but the building blocks for a more just, equitable, and life-honoring immigration system are present in the United States. Only when Christians take the command to love the neighbor seriously—only when they expand the circle of love to include immigrants—only then will real, sustainable, life-honoring immigration reform be possible.

APPENDIX A  
PRE-SCREENING TOOL

The following questions will be asked of potential interviewees to determine whether they will meet the criteria to participate in this study.

1. Are you serving a church in the state of Texas that is part of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) denomination?
2. Would you consider your congregation to be a “purple” congregation?
3. Would you be available to have an interview (either over the phone or face to face) that would last between 45-60 minutes?

If the participant answers yes to all three questions, they are a good fit for this project.

## APPENDIX B

### QUESTIONS FOR THE INTERVIEWEE

The questions asked to the participants will be divided into three categories:

Demographic, Biblical-Theological Hermeneutical, and Congregational.

Tentative questions are:

#### Status of Church

- How would you describe the theological composition of your congregation? (i.e., liberal, progressive, conservative, “purple,” etc.) If purple, what about the political composition?
  - Has the church ever taken a congregational survey (in house or through a consulting firm) to ascertain the composition of the church politically or theologically?
- How has the congregation’s theological make up been a hinderance to ministries or mission work? How has it been helpful?

#### Demographic Questions

- Name, Church serving, title, location
- What is your education background? (Bachelor’s degree? Master of Divinity? Doctor of Ministry? Ph.D.?)
- How long have you been serving your current congregation?
- How long have you been in ordained ministry?
- Who did you vote for in the 2016 Presidential Election?
- Have you decided how you will vote in the upcoming 2020 election? If so, who? If not, what is delaying your choice?

#### Biblical-Theological Hermeneutical Questions

- Does the Bible support immigration policy? Why or why not?
- How do you use theology or the Bible to support your personal immigration beliefs?
- How do you view the Bible, and how do you read the Bible (i.e., how do you understand, read, and interpret the Bible?)
- How do you read and interpret the parable of the good Samaritan with respect to the issue of immigration?
  - What other scriptures inform your immigration theology?
- How have you seen the scriptures used or misused when discussing immigration from a theological perspective.
- Who influences your theological thinking and reflection regarding the issue of immigration? How so?

- How does your theological view of immigration inform your thinking and reflection with regard to elections, politics? Ministries in the church?

#### Congregational

- How does the issue of immigration arise in your congregation?
- How has the issue of immigration been construed?
- Have you ever been criticized for “being political” in your prayers or sermons? If so, please describe the persons’ main objections.
  - Did their feedback affect how you preached/taught or offered a prayer in the proceeding weeks? If so, how? If not, why not?
- Have you been criticized for not speaking about an issue such as immigration in your worship service(s)? If so, please describe the persons’ main objections.
  - Did their feedback affect how you preached/taught or offered a prayer in the proceeding weeks? If so, how? If not, why not?
- Have you ever self-limited yourself in your preaching/teaching to avoid political conversation or discussion? If so, what was the basis of this limiting? If not, why did you feel it was needed to have these discussions?
- Have you participated in any protests or gatherings regarding the United States’ policy of immigration?
  - If so, was this “approved” by the governing body of the congregation?
  - If so, what the reaction of the congregation?
  - If so, what was the turnout?
- Has your congregation joined or made any declaration regarding immigration?
  - If so, what was the process to arrive at this declaration?
  - If not, why not? Do you ever see your congregation making a formal statement or declaration?

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