

**UUFD Social Responsibility and Justice
Immigration Team
Community Education – volume 2**

Immigration as a Moral Issue - UUA 2013 Statement of Conscience

A belief in “the inherent worth and dignity of every person” is core to Unitarian Universalism: every person, no exceptions. As religious people, our Principles call us to acknowledge the immigrant experience and to affirm and promote the flourishing of the human family.

Our Sources “challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.” Hebrew scripture teaches love for the foreigner because “you were foreigners in the land of Egypt” (Leviticus 19:33-34). Christian scripture reports that Jesus and his disciples were itinerants. When asked “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus responded with the parable of the Good Samaritan, a foreigner who treated a badly beaten man as the foreigner would have wished to be treated (Luke 10:25-37). The Qur’an teaches doing “good to...those in need, neighbors who are near, neighbors who are strangers, the companion by your side, the wayfarer that you meet” (4:36). The Universal Declaration of Human Rights asserts that “everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country” (article 13.2). Unitarian Universalist Principles and Sources call us to recognize the opportunities and challenges of human migration—caring for ourselves and our families, interacting with strangers, valuing diversity, and dealing with immigration systems.

Historical Background

Before recorded history, some people migrated out of Africa and later across the world. People left their places of birth to feed themselves, protect themselves from hostile environments, or better their lives. Some people migrated voluntarily, while others were forced to migrate due to enslavement, war, famine, marriage, or fear of persecution. Whatever the circumstances, the human family is composed almost entirely of immigrants or descendants of immigrants.

Most of the land mass on earth is now divided into nations with boundaries. Although we recognize that national boundaries are often arbitrary and disregard historical tribal boundaries and wildlife migratory patterns, we acknowledge that these national boundaries exist and that nations will protect their borders. Nations have assumed the right and obligation to protect the security and well-being of their citizens by enacting and enforcing immigration laws. Our challenge as religious people is to distinguish the moral from the immoral, supporting the former and opposing the latter. Moral immigration laws that are just and humane contribute to the public good, define the parameters of legal immigration, and restrict harmful influences such as criminal intent, epidemics, and contraband. Unfortunately, not all immigration laws are moral; some use race, class, religion, ethnicity, ability, or sexual orientation to dictate who belongs and who does not.

Underlying Factors Contributing to Immigration and Lack of Documentation

Today people leave their places of birth and migrate for the same reasons people always have—to be safe, to meet their needs for food and shelter, and to better their lives. Thus, violence, environmental change, and economic conditions often motivate migration. Acts of violence that drive people to migrate include armed conflicts, violence against women, violence related to sexual orientation and gender expression, ethnic cleansing, political persecution, and genocide. Environmental conditions that lead to migration include climate change, droughts, floods, radiation, and pollution.

Economic factors are currently the primary driving force behind immigration worldwide. Economic factors that cause people to migrate include the inability to meet needs for sufficient food and adequate shelter and the desire to better their lives. Contributors to these economic conditions include population growth, environmental

degradation, globalization, and policies that address land ownership, tariffs, trade, and working conditions, many of which are continuing legacies of imperialism and colonialism.

A mechanism for regulating immigration is the issuance of visas, which are legal documents giving permission to enter and stay in a nation for a period of time. When the supply of visas is far below the demand, then pressure to enter a country illegally or overstay a visa increases. A similar pressure occurs when the length of time between applying for a permanent visa and its issuance is a matter of years. When people cannot obtain or renew visas but choose to enter or remain in a country anyway, they become undocumented immigrants.

Visas that allow multiple border crossings encourage people to visit their families knowing that they can return and work. When crossing a border is difficult or hazardous, the likelihood of returning to one's family decreases and the desire to send for one's family increases. The families of undocumented immigrants wanting to reunite with their loved ones also have no means of entering legally. A broken immigration system opens the way for illegality, human trafficking, and exploitation.

Consequences

Who migrates, how they migrate, where they migrate to, and when they migrate are central to immigration policies worldwide. While immigrants find jobs, build community, fall in love, have children, and in other ways enrich a country with new ways of thinking and being, some people declare them unwelcome and label them—not just their status—illegal.

Lack of documentation and legal status can lead to exploitation. Work visas often require having an employer-sponsor, which can limit a person's freedom to change employment. Some employers are unable to find workers willing to do certain jobs under the work conditions and at the wages they offer. Other employers are stymied by onerous requirements to prove that they need people with certain abilities. When the number of work visas is fewer than the number of workers demanded by the economy, employers will fill the need regardless of workers' documentation.

Documented and undocumented immigrants alike are often denied the civil rights protections of citizens, paid less than citizens, labor in unsafe and unhealthy conditions, and/or are forced to work and live without pay under the threat of violence. In the United States, increased border security has resulted in undocumented immigrants crossing in more dangerous and remote areas where basic human needs such as drinking water do not exist.

Increased enforcement of immigration laws and the proliferation of for-profit detention centers have led to egregious human rights violations with little accountability or transparency. For example, immigrants in the U.S. detention system are not afforded the same due process rights as U.S. citizens, leading to unnecessarily lengthy detentions, and thus greater profits for the prison industry. These centers are poorly regulated and often overcrowded. Essential needs, including medical attention, are often denied, while more cost effective and humane measures are ignored. Immigration enforcement consumes increasingly more of the federal government's resources.

Many undocumented immigrants and their families live in constant fear of deportation. This fear affects their use of educational opportunities and health care services, and their willingness to interact with local police officers. Enlisting local law enforcement agencies in immigration enforcement violates accepted practices of community policing and erodes trust between police and the communities they serve, sometimes resulting in racial profiling of those who appear to be foreign. Deportation results in destroyed dreams and broken families—partners separated and children taken away from their caregivers or forced to return to a place they do not know. The perceived and constructed threat of those who are different has led some individuals and nations to meet immigrants with fear. Fear has become a social and political force that incorrectly labels people as “illegals,” “criminals,” and “terrorists.” Our Unitarian Universalist (UU) Principles and Sources compel us to affirm that all immigrants, regardless of legal status, should be treated justly and humanely.