



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

### Focus Articles:

📖 A More Perfect Union  
(*Immigration*, pp. 26-34)

### Suggested Article:

📖 Planning for Immigration  
(*Immigration*, pp. 89-93)

### What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to [Christian\\_Reflection@baylor.edu](mailto:Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu).

### Christian Reflection

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# A More Perfect Union

To the national debate over immigration, American churches bring keen insights gleaned from biblical wisdom and years of experience working directly with immigrants. For our union to become more perfect, churches must continue not only to talk about but also to walk with immigrants.

### Responsive Prayer

**Merciful God, we confess we have failed to see the stranger among us.**

We have closed our eyes to the injustices that force people to leave their homelands and seek shelter in unfamiliar places.

We claim that you are our refuge and security, yet we act as though national borders provide us with our only opportunity for peace.

**Forgive us for ignoring your call to peacemaking and for only looking after our own interests.**

Help us to recall our personal stories as sojourners in a foreign land so that we may fully embody your call to provide for the orphan, widow, and stranger. Amen.

**Scripture Reading: Deuteronomy 24:14-15, 17-22**

### Reflection

"The three most basic questions concerning migration are 'Who has the right to migrate?' 'Where can individuals migrate?' and 'How should migrants be treated in receiving countries?'" write lawyers Michele Pistone and John Hoeffner. Since the end of the Cold War, most governments (with a few notable exceptions) have agreed that every person has the right to migrate. Yet the second and third questions still deeply divide societies. "While the difficult personal circumstances of most immigrants are very widely recognized and create much sympathy," they note, "immigration restrictions exist largely because many citizens believe that—all humanitarian impulses aside—as a practical matter, we cannot do more (and perhaps must do less)."

Yet statements by American churches—Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Evangelical—often take "the opposite approach, prodding society to do more and admonishing it not to do less," Pistone and Hoeffner observe. Their more generous stance is grounded in biblical materials relevant to migration, like the flight of the holy family into Egypt (Matthew 2:12-23), Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37), and the laws regarding Israel's treatment of resident aliens (e.g., Exodus 23:9; Leviticus 19:33-34; Deuteronomy 10:17-19 and 27:19). Indeed, the Son of Man judges "the nations" positively in another parable: "I was a stranger and you welcomed me" (Matthew 25:35c).

Pistone and Hoeffner discovered that the church statements:

- ▶ *generally agree with the broad public opinion that refugees should be granted asylum.* They tend to disagree on the admission of non-refugees, who are usually economic migrants.
- ▶ *Many churches are calling for greater acceptance of economic migrants, and several say desperately poor immigrants must be accepted.* Nevertheless, all admit "the overall complexity of the issue and



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the right of a nation to control its borders." A number of churches are urging the United States to develop a path to citizenship for undocumented economic migrants.

- ▶ *Most church groups sharply oppose so-called "attrition" laws passed in their states to encourage immigrants to go elsewhere. They fear such laws may criminalize congregations giving basic assistance to undocumented migrants.*

"On many immigration issues, Christian churches do not speak with one voice," Pistone and Hoeffner admit, but "this divergence of views is entirely to be expected and can even be healthy." By listening to one another on these issues, we may discover our assumptions about practical matters are incomplete or mistaken. And we should be patient with people who oppose the church statements with commendable motives. "Support for immigrants is only one aspect of a more general Christian preference for the poor," they write. Some people "may work on behalf of poor non-immigrants and regard immigrants as making life harder for other poor people. [Others]... believe that the best solution to the 'problem' of immigration is to increase economic growth in developing nations.... Committed people of this sort are not opponents, but allies in a larger cause. Churches should do more to recognize them as fellow laborers in the vineyard and take care not to reinforce their alienation."

### Study Questions

1. How do the scripture passages cited in the churches' statements apply to the issues of immigration?
2. In your view, what is the thorniest issue related to immigration policy today? What guidance do you find in the church statements that Pistone and Hoeffner review?
3. Is it good for churches to speak out on public issues when they disagree? Or should they wait for agreement?
4. "Perhaps it is healthy for churches to assume that no one is in fact listening" to their public statements, Pistone and Hoeffner write. This belief "may be a blessing in disguise if the result is an increased incentive...to give the hungry something to eat and to invite the stranger in." Do you agree?

### Departing Hymn: "Seek the Peace of the City" (vv. 1, 3, and 5)

Seek the peace of the city;  
make this land your home.  
I have set you here to prosper;  
make this land your home.

Seek the peace of the exile,  
stranger on the road.  
I will walk along beside you,  
stranger on the road.

Seek the peace of the city;  
find me in this place.  
I have brought you here to know me;  
find me in this place.

*David Wright (2004), © Copyright 2004 David Wright*

*Tune: SEEK THE PEACE*

*James E. Clemens (2004), © Copyright 2004 James E. Clemens*

# A More Perfect Union

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>	<i>Dual Session (#1)</i>	<i>Dual Session (#2)</i>
Responsive Prayer	Responsive Prayer	Responsive Prayer	Responsive Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Matthew 25:31-46
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)	Reflection (all sections)	Discuss statements by your church body
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)	Questions 1 and 3	Question 2 and 4
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To survey the public statements on immigration policy by churches in the United States.
2. To discuss how they challenge public opinion and sometimes disagree among themselves.
3. To provide group members an opportunity to grapple with the contentious issues of immigration policy in a prayerful and productive way.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide.

Distribute copies of *Immigration (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting.

## Begin with an Observation

“Some scholars have referred to our time as the ‘age of migration,’” Daniel Groody, C.S.C., writes. “More people are migrating around the world than ever before in human history. Largely because of changes precipitated by globalization, the number is twice as large as it was twenty-five years ago. Today nearly 200 million people are on the move, which is roughly the equivalent of the population of Brazil, the fifth largest country on the planet. Of these, approximately thirty to forty million are undocumented, twenty-four million are internally displaced, and almost ten million are refugees....

Such flows of people cause much conflict and controversy. Amidst the ensuing clash of cultures, identities, and religions, there is a great need to sort out the conceptual issues of immigration and to design just and humane policies that respond to the pressing needs of the new migrants—some of the most vulnerable people living on the planet” (*Immigration*, 89).

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading together the responsive prayer in the study guide. The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

## Scripture Reading

Ask two group members to read Deuteronomy 24:14-15 and 17-22 from a modern translation.

## Reflection

American churches have not been silent on contentious immigration issues; often they have challenged public opinion by calling for more generous immigration policies. Yet, the churches disagree among themselves and some individual Christians disagree with their church’s statements. So, in this study you should expect and allow group members to disagree with one another. Even if we all seek to love our neighbors, far and near, we will have difficult practical policies to work out. Recall Michelle Pistone and John Hoeffner’s concluding advice: “For our union to become more perfect, churches must continue to *talk about* and *walk with* immigrants, as we

all struggle to learn which of our current imperfections are necessary products of our time and which could be presently overcome with greater commitment and imagination.”

You might extend this discussion to two sessions. In the second session, distribute the statements on immigration produced by your state and national church bodies for members to review and discuss. (They will be available on denominational Web sites.) How do those statements address the three basic questions about immigration: “Who has the right to immigrate?” “Where can individuals immigrate?” and “How should immigrants be treated in receiving countries?” How do the statements challenge the wider public opinion? Do members think the statements are entirely persuasive or in need of further reflection?

### **Study Questions**

1. Form small groups to some of these scripture passages: the laws regarding Israel’s treatment of resident aliens (e.g., Exodus 23:9; Leviticus 19:33-34; Deuteronomy 10:17-19 and 27:19), the flight of the holy family into Egypt (Matthew 2:12-23), the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37), and the parable of the Judgment of the Nations (Matthew 25:31-46). Since the Bible is not a rulebook for social issues, we should not expect any of these passages to mention immigration directly. Yet each passage has an indirect application to the issues of immigration policy. Members might mention that God expected his chosen nation of Israel to care for strangers, and the Son of Man will judge all nations according to their treatment of strangers; that God in Christ suffered as a refugee; and that Jesus praises the compassion of the Samaritan who personally cared for a stranger. Personal (and societal) forms of hospitality to strangers are not an option for people who live in the story of God.

[If you extend this discussion to two sessions, you may use Matthew 25:31-46 as the focal scripture reading for the second session and encourage members to explore scripture passages in their own church’s statements that they review.]

2. As members explore the complexities of (national and local) issues surrounding immigration, encourage them to seek wisdom in the church statements. The “thorniest” (i.e., *most contentious*) issue may be what rights and opportunities countries should grant to certain economic immigrants – especially those who are undocumented, or who are indigent, and so on. On the other hand, the “thorniest” (i.e., *most likely to conflict with basic Christian ministries*) issue may be responding to the “attrition” laws passed by some cities and states, because some of these laws threaten to make it illegal to assist undocumented immigrants with their basic needs in housing, health care, job training, transportation, and so on.
3. While churches should agree on the gospel, they may disagree on its application to complicated public issues like immigration. Pistone and Hoeffner think churches should continue to speak out even when they disagree. On the one hand, they can learn from each other and correct one another’s errors in judgment. “Immigration is an immensely complicated field,” they note, “and our determinations about it often are necessarily based on prudential judgments involving subject matters on which churches have no special institutional competence. Hence, alternative views on immigration among Christian churches can present an opportunity to learn.” A second reason is that “our awareness of differing views can be useful in making plain the sometimes hidden assumptions that underlie our own opinions. And sometimes we may learn that our assumptions about prudential matters are incomplete or even mistaken.” Finally, they note that individuals may agree on the nature of a problem, but weigh the value of competing solutions differently – e.g., one may think it best to address the problem of economic migration through a more open immigration policy in receiving nations, but another prefers to enhance the economies of the sending nations. Similarly church bodies may weigh the value of competing solutions differently; this type of disagreement invites them to seek a more inclusive solution.
4. Pistone and Hoeffner believe Christian churches prophetically witness to the gospel through their way of life as well as by their thoughtful contributions to public debates. Prophecy is not merely actions or words; it is *both*.

### **Departing Hymn**

“Seek the Peace of the City” is on pp. 44-45 of *Immigration*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.