



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Faithful Companions
(*Immigration*, pp. 35-43)

Suggested Article:

📖 I Was a Stranger: Jesus
and the Undocumented
Immigrant
(*Immigration*, pp. 63-67)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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Faithful Companions

How can we obey both biblical directives—to be good citizens and to show hospitality to immigrants, legal and illegal? The ISAAC Project is helping churches across the United States work within existing law to assist all immigrants by creating ESL and citizenship classes, family separation ministries, and government “recognized” immigration organizations.

Responsive Prayer

O God of Justice, our world is in turmoil, filled with injustices that threaten the lives of your children in every nation.

Use us as your vessels of justice and mercy in a world longing for liberation.

O God of Hope, you are present in every corner of this world, living within us and among us.

May your Spirit breathe fresh your promise of redemption and deliverance into the hearts of those without peaceful soil and into the hearts of those who would extend mercy. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Matthew 8:5-13

Reflection

Not one, but two ‘strangers’ met in Capernaum. “Jesus was operating on strange turf,” for in Matthew’s Gospel “prior to meeting the centurion, Jesus had been ministering primarily within his own linguistic, ethnic, and religious community,” notes Richard Muñoz. “Our natural inclination is to reach out *first* to those who look, speak, and act like we do,” but this story reminds us Jesus left his comfort zone to care for others. Also the centurion, stationed by the army far from home, was in strange territory. “It must have been difficult for this man of earthly authority to approach Jesus and publicly beg for help. Yet he had to approach the Savior openly and without fear to receive his miracle. His remarkable spiritual journey from a stranger to a participant in the feast of the ‘kingdom of heaven’ started with his willingness to use his newfound knowledge to conquer any fears he may have had about approaching Jesus, the stranger.”

We will need Jesus’ compassion and the centurion’s courage in order to address the needs of immigrants. The Immigration Service and Aid Center (ISAAC) Project, led by attorney Richard Muñoz, gives congregations the tools they need to start and sustain three basic ministries to all immigrants in the United States.

- ▶ *English language training and citizenship education.* The United States Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS) requires immigrants who want to become citizens to pass an English proficiency exam and a test over American history and civic procedures. ISAAC connects congregations with adult literacy organizations that provide lesson plans and teaching guides to help immigrants successfully complete these exams.
- ▶ *Family separation ministry.* When “deportable” aliens are apprehended and returned to their country of origin, they may find themselves in a strange land without resources. Muñoz recalls when a pastor contacted ISAAC after “a member of his congregation had been caught in an immigration raid, detained, and ordered to return to his country of origin that he had left *as a child*



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over fifteen years ago.” ISAAC is creating a network of pastors, missionaries, and churches in other countries to receive these newly removed individuals *in their countries of origin*. It also helps American congregations minister to their spouses, children, and extended family that are left behind in the United States.

- *Immigration counseling and processing.* In immigration proceedings, the federal government does not appoint lawyers for immigrants who cannot afford one. Instead it accredits certain individuals “who work for approved non-profit entities...to complete required paperwork and documents for immigrants and, at times, represent them in special immigration courts.” A church may designate persons for this accreditation, if it charges only “nominal fees” for its services and has “at its disposal adequate knowledge, information and experience.” ISAAC helps local churches complete the federal “recognition” process and train their representatives in immigration law and procedure.

“Not every congregation—even a large one—has the volunteer base, resources, time, and facilities to accommodate an immigration ministry,” Muñoz concludes. But when a church is ready, ISAAC can help it to “reach out to those immigrant families torn asunder; provide comfort and a spiritual home to our removed brothers and sisters in Christ; teach newcomers the rich language, history, and hope of our nation; and guide them through a complex and confusing immigration system.”

Study Questions

1. What are the basic needs of most immigrants as they seek United States citizenship? What resources does a local church need in order to be “faithful companions” to them?
2. What strengths displayed by Jesus and the centurion will we need when we minister to strangers?
3. In his article, how does Richard Muñoz address the fear that it would be illegal to minister to undocumented immigrants?

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

Faithful Companions

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Responsive Prayer	Responsive Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To understand how congregations can work within the law to provide essential ministries to all immigrants, legal and illegal, in the United States.
2. To interpret Matthew's account of Jesus' encounter with the Roman centurion, from both men's perspectives, as a framework for our ministry to immigrants.
3. To introduce the work of the Immigration Service and Aid Center (ISAAC) Project in assisting congregations to start and sustain an immigration ministry.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Immigration (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting.

Begin with an Observation

In 2003, Cardinal Stephen Fumio Hamao of Japan poignantly described "the experience of the majority of migrants" in this way: "When a person in need is in a strange country, where he does not understand the language and much less know its culture and legislation, he is in a very vulnerable position. Even in the country of arrival, where he had high hopes of a better life, he can easily fall victim to the abuse of his human rights.... Migrants and refugees are in fact easy prey to exploitation, and, in extreme cases, also to human trafficking. They are therefore often victims of violence, maybe not always physical, but very often psychological and moral, as in cases of marginalization and exclusion, discrimination, xenophobia and other forms of intolerance. They are often made 'scapegoats' for local unemployment or criminal activities."

His observation reminds us that lawfully assisting all immigrants, legal and illegal, is an important part of the Church's mission to care for the most vulnerable human beings.

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 a group member to read Matthew 8:5-13 from a modern translation.

Reflection

This study will help members articulate the needs of immigrants in your area and survey your congregation's resources (volunteer base, money, time, and facilities) for starting and sustaining a church-based immigration ministry. Since a church-based immigration ministry may serve some newcomers who are undocumented, attorney Richard Muñoz addresses in his article some common misconceptions and fears you may have about federal human trafficking and smuggling statutes that prohibit unlawful "transporting," "harboring," and

“encouraging” of undocumented aliens in the United States.

For more information on all of these topics and for assistance in starting in immigration ministry that is “recognized” by the United States government, consult the ISAAC Project Web site (www.isaacproject.com). Cooperatively founded by the Baptist General Convention of Texas (www.bgct.org) and Buckner Children and Family Services (www.bucknerchildren.org), the Immigration Service and Aid Center (“ISAAC”) Project helps churches work within existing law to help all immigrants – not just undocumented ones – with some basic needs.

Study Questions

1. Immigrants often need (1) educational assistance to prepare for the English proficiency and citizenship exams given by the United States Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS), and (2) legal assistance to interpret complex immigration rules and regulations and to prepare for federal immigration proceedings. Many undocumented immigrants who are deported need (3) assistance in relocating within their countries of origin and support for their spouses, children, and extended family members who are left behind in the United States.

Divide members into three groups to survey your congregation’s resources (volunteer base, money, time, and facilities) for these three types of assistance. You might begin with only one type, or combine resources with another congregation to provide a full-orbed ministry. According to the Census Bureau, the top ten countries of origin for immigrants to the United States in 1996 were Mexico, Philippines, India, Vietnam, China, Dominican Republic, Cuba, Ukraine, Russia, and Jamaica. Of course, a congregation-based immigration ministry would be hard pressed to provide family separation ministry to immigrants from all of these countries, but it could focus on one or two groups in their local community.

2. Richard Muñoz invites us to emulate both Jesus and the centurion. Jesus, according to the Gospel of Matthew, ministers for the first time to people outside his ethnic group. Likewise the centurion in the Roman army conquers his fear and trusts a stranger to minister to him. Which do you think is more difficult – to trust a stranger to whom we minister, or to trust a stranger to help us as a channel of God’s grace in our time of need?
3. Immigration ministries usually assist undocumented newcomers, often intentionally, but at least inadvertently, Muñoz notes, since “federal law does *not* require you to verify the citizenship or immigration status of the members of your congregation or beneficiaries of your benevolence.” Is benevolence to undocumented immigrants a violation of federal laws that prohibit unlawful “transporting,” “harboring,” and “encouraging” undocumented aliens in the United States? Muñoz clarifies common misconceptions about these laws, though he notes his “discussion of these laws is not intended to be legal advice pertaining to your specific situation and should not be construed as such. It is for educational and informational purposes only.” He notes these interpretations of key terms by federal courts:

- *Transporting*: “Willful transportation of illegal aliens is not, per se, a violation of the statute, for the law proscribes such conduct only when it is in furtherance of the alien’s unlawful presence.” Muñoz says in each case “a court will determine whether conduct is ‘in furtherance of such violation of the law’ by looking at the defendant’s intent and whether there is a direct or substantial relationship between that transportation and its furtherance of the alien’s presence in the United States.”
- *Harboring*: This is an “activity tending *substantially to facilitate* an alien’s remaining in the United States illegally,” and “[i]mplicit in the wording ‘harbor, shield, or conceal,’ is the connotation that something is being hidden from detection.”
- *Encouraging*: This “relates to actions taken to convince the illegal alien to come to this country or to stay in this country.” Some examples are engaging in document fraud and facilitating unlawful entry into the United States.

Muñoz encourages each local congregation to “understand the legal environment in which it exists” in regard to assisting immigrants, “and then, like the centurion, use this new knowledge to overcome its fears and act responsibly for the good of the Kingdom.”

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.