



IMMIGRATION

POSITION STATEMENT

Adopted 10/23/12

The Montana Association of Churches seeks to love our neighbors and welcome the stranger by promoting immigration legislation, public policies and business practices that are humane and just.

SUPPORTING STATEMENT

Immigration is Part of Our Story

Since the first immigrants followed the path of Meriwether Lewis' and William Clark's "Corps of Discovery Expedition" exploration of the western United States in 1804-1806, immigration has been part of the story of our region. The decades immediately preceding and following the formation of the State of Montana in 1889 saw significant influxes of immigrants to this land. An English colony was established in Helena and the Yellowstone Valley in 1882; a few French came to Missoula County; and a few Dutch families settled in the Gallatin Valley in 1893. Another settlement was that of Finnish lumbermen east of Missoula in 1892. Italians and Germans settled in Fergus and Park counties, and many Germans came from North Dakota and Canada. The cattlemen of Montana were primarily English and Scottish, although they drove cattle owned by the Germans. The sheep men were also from the British Isles. The smelters and mills of the Anaconda Copper Mining Company in Anaconda and Great Falls at first drew Scandinavian and Irish workers to the area. After 1900, a heavy influx of workers from the Balkan countries arrived. The Montana coalmines of Cascade, Carbon, and Musselshell counties employed workers from Ireland, Poland, and Italy.¹

We honor the courage and resourcefulness of these immigrants to fashion settlements that continue to shape our landscape today. Their diversity continues to enrich our state. And we honor the strength of spirit of both past and present immigrants who seek asylum from violent or oppressive homelands, a better life for their families or the opportunity to worship without persecution.

We recognize within our history the immigrant groups who were treated as undesirable and ultimately were unable to find a place of refuge and welcome in Montana. We recall the importation and subsequent deportation of Chinese laborers to build railroads, acknowledge the hidden history of African Americans in Montana, remember the struggle for equality of Irish Americans and will not forget the internment of 650 Japanese Americans and 1,200 Italian Americans held at Fort Missoula during World War II. Admitting the shame that will forever be

a part of our past and seeking understanding should help to prevent the repeating of such injustices.

The Scriptural Imperative to Care for the Immigrant

As we consider the causes and realities of human immigration, we affirm these shared religious convictions concerning our ethical duties to people who are immigrants:

- God’s people are a pilgrim people. Throughout Biblical history, the people of God have been sojourners, refugees, and immigrants.ⁱⁱ Because of this heritage, the Bible teaches us to defend, protect, and honor the rights and humanity of the sojourner, stranger, refugee, and immigrant.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Scripture instructs us to welcome the stranger and reminds us to show hospitality to immigrants. God’s Word reminds us of the rich blessings we receive from God and of our responsibility to share these blessings with the whole human family.^{iv}
- Jesus instructed us to love our neighbors as ourselves^v and taught us to follow his example of reaching out to outsiders.^{vi} We seek to see the new “strangers” as our neighbors and be open to welcoming all whom are considered “outsiders.”

The Case from Natural Law

We affirm that God has granted all of humanity a basic human right to freedom of movement, especially if someone is being unjustly deprived of “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” as enshrined in our own Declaration of Independence. These are, as the Declaration says, “inalienable” natural rights and not dependent on a government to dictate them.

Our Challenge to Montana Religious and Civic Leaders

The immigrant population, people moving from another country, is growing in Montana. The number of immigrants in the state increased by 29.8 percent between 2000 and 2008.^{vii} While this change in percentage seems high, the number of persons obtaining legal permanent resident status in Montana is still relatively small. In 2000, it was 488 and in 2009, it was 553.^{viii} This change in our population is not a cause for alarm. However, as the number of immigrants increases more rapidly in other states, there has often been unjust, reactionary legislation proposed. Similar legislation has been proposed in our state. We challenge our religious and civic leaders to take the following positive, proactive actions instead:

- We acknowledge the ease with which we as human beings are prone to fear people whom we consider “other.” We challenge one another to overcome fear of those who are not like us. This fear of the “other” has had tragic consequences in the United States and the world. This nation fought with itself to overcome a legacy of slavery, struggling in every generation against racial, ethnic, gender, and religious discrimination, and today may again succumb to fear, xenophobia, and racist impulses directed against new immigrants. We challenge this and every generation to resist racial, ethnic and religious profiling.
- We recognize the urgent need for increased awareness about trafficking of human beings, and about the economic and sexual exploitation of immigrants. We challenge our leaders to provide effective enforcement against human traffickers and smugglers, and the defense and protection of victims of such crimes.

- We recognize that the government may have legitimate, morally justifiable reasons for denying immigration to certain persons. We challenge our leaders to treat such persons with dignity and respect.
- We support the integrity of families and believe in their right to remain intact. Recognizing that our immigration laws currently can separate parents from children, we challenge our leaders to change those laws.^{ix}
- We know that our country's agreements with trading partners have created unlivable conditions in other countries. Faced with these conditions people in those countries are forced to choose between staying at home or seeking sustainable livelihoods elsewhere. We challenge our leaders to consider the impact of these agreements and policies on our neighbors and rewrite them.
- We challenge both our leaders and ourselves to lead in prayer; teach, and preach about the biblical, spiritual, and moral basis for compassionate hospitality toward immigrants.

ⁱ Radford, Dwight A., "Montana," in *Ancestry's Red Book*, ed. Alice Eichholz. Salt Lake City: Ancestry, 1992.

ⁱⁱ "When they [Israel] were few in number, of little account, and strangers in the land" (1 Chronicles 16:19). c.f. Exod. 1:1-14; Acts 7:6

ⁱⁱⁱ "You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Deuteronomy 10:19). c.f. Exod. 22:21; Ps. 94:6; Jer.7:6; Ezek. 22:29; Zech. 7:10

^{iv} "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it" (Hebrews 13:2). And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you or naked and gave you clothing? And the King will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did to the least of these who are members of my family, you did to me.' (Matthew 25:38-40)

^v "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Matthew 22:26-39). C.f. Leviticus 19:33-35; Genesis 12:1-4; Mark 12:31; Romans 13:9; Galatians 5:14

^{vi} One example of Jesus reaching out to the outsider may be found in John 4:4-14 as Jesus shares the news that "those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty" (John 4:14) with a Samaritan woman at the well.

^{vii} Montana Social and Demographic Characteristics." MPI Data Hub: Migration Facts, Stats and Maps. Online: www.migrationinformation.org Last Accessed: November 21, 2010.

^{viii} "Persons obtaining legal permanent resident status by state or territory of residence: Fiscal years 2000 to 2009." 2009 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics. Office of Immigration Statistics. August 2010.

^{ix} The use of terms like "unauthorized immigrant," or "person without papers," or "undocumented immigrant," both accurately describe the person's situation without being dehumanizing an individual. The popular usage of language like "illegal immigrants," or "illegals" is dehumanizing and confuses the immigration debate. Colorlines and the Applied Research Center Present [sic]. Online: <http://colorlines.com/droptheiword/resources/en/toolkit.html>. Last Accessed: August 31, 2011.

Montana Association of Churches

American Baptist Churches of the Northwest * Christian Churches (Disciples of Christ) in Montana
 Episcopal Church Diocese of Montana * Evangelical Lutheran Church in America-Montana Synod
 Presbyterian Church (USA)-Glacier Presbytery * Presbyterian Church (USA)-Yellowstone Presbytery
 Roman Catholic Diocese of Great Falls-Billings * Roman Catholic Diocese of Helena
 United Church of Christ of Montana-Northern Wyoming Conference * United Methodist Church Yellowstone Conference

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