



Safe refuge U.S. ASYLUM POLICY

“Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured.” (Hebrews 13:1-3)

Dina Nayeri writes of her experience as a refugee in the United States: “It is the obligation of every person born in a safer room to open the door when someone in danger knocks.” Many European Anabaptists came to the U.S. seeking safety from persecution and violence at a time when borders were largely open and there was no requirement to prove to a judge that their lives were threatened.

Around the world today, people are still persecuted, tortured and killed for their religious and political beliefs or membership in a particular social group. Even before COVID-19 border closures, those seeking refuge in the U.S. increasingly found a closed door.

Sometimes those doors close because people, including policymakers, get stuck in questions of fear and scarcity. John Garland, pastor of San Antonio Mennonite Church, argues that, as Christians, we should instead be asking questions such as: How is God transforming us and them? How are we fulfilling the Christian obligation to love your neighbor as yourself? ✨

The sun sets over the Tucson Mountains at Gates Pass in Tucson, Arizona. (MCC photo/Laura Pauls-Thomas)

Closing the door

by Tammy Alexander

Current refugee and asylum laws emerged after World War II with a recognition that several countries, including the U.S., refused safe harbor to Jewish refugees fleeing the Holocaust. According to U.S. and international law, an asylum seeker is someone who leaves their home country, moves to a second country and asks for safe refuge. A refugee is a person who flees to a second country before returning home, if conditions allow, or being resettled through the United Nations into a third country. Both go through an arduous screening process that can take years.

Sadly, these laws did not completely end the rejection of those seeking asylum in the U.S. In the late 20th century thousands of Haitian asylum seekers were detained, and many were forcibly returned to Haiti. More recently, the Obama administration responded to an influx of Central America asylum seekers in 2014 by opening new detention centers to hold families and sought ways to return families and unaccompanied children

quickly, without the required court hearings.

Beginning in 2017, the Trump administration introduced a torrent of new policies aimed at reducing access to asylum in the U.S. They stepped up the system of “metering” to severely restrict the number of people who can request asylum at a border crossing each day. The Migrant Protection Protocols (“Remain in Mexico”) policy forces people to wait in Mexico for their court hearings, away from family members and without access to legal counsel. Both policies leave migrants in crowded shelters and camps, often in locations where they are at great risk of violence and kidnapping.

In the spring of 2018, thousands of families were forcibly separated when a new policy sent parents to



Dayri's story

Dayri Sambula came to the U.S. from Honduras when she was 25 years old because she was receiving death threats and was a victim of political persecution. She made the difficult decision to leave her home and job as a nurse along with son, Silmer, who was 4 years old at the time. She says, “If I tell you about the process of traveling [to the U.S.], the only thing I wanted was to safeguard my life and safeguard my son’s life.”

The process of applying for political asylum included four years of countless immigration appointments and court appearances. Dayri found valuable legal assistance at Garifuna Community Services, a faith-based community center located in the Bronx which is one location where the New York Mennonite Immigration Program serves clients.

Now Dayri and her son have their residency papers and, with her work permit, Dayri is working as a home health aide and is hoping to further her studies in nursing. Silmer, now 9 years old (pictured here), is excelling in his math and science classes at school.

Excerpted from “New York Mennonite Immigration Program: Celebrating 20 years of serving immigrants in NYC”

on asylum seekers



Photo courtesy of Katherine Smith

detention centers and their children to shelters. Though the practice is less widespread now, some families continue to be separated. More recently, Asylum Cooperative Agreements have sent hundreds of asylum seekers to Central American countries where there are not structures in place to keep them safe.

Many asylum seekers are placed in detention centers upon arrival and sometimes languish there for years while their cases wind through immigration courts. Detention is a particularly cruel practice for those who have already experienced unimaginable trauma.

Take the case of Pastor Steven Tendo who came to the U.S. seeking asylum but has been in detention for more than 18 months. Tendo was a victim of political persecution and torture in his home country, including the amputation of two of his fingers and the murder of several of his family members.

Despite having a sponsor who is willing to provide housing and support while he awaits a court ruling, immigration officials refuse to release Tendo. Due to inadequate treatment of his diabetes in detention, he is going blind. COVID-19 is spreading at the center where he is held. No one benefits from the detention of asylum seekers—except the private prison companies who profit from their confinement.

In March 2020, administration officials closed U.S. borders to nearly all asylum seekers, citing COVID-19. Though crossing the border is now allowed for work and commerce, asylum seekers are still deemed “nonessential” travelers, as if fleeing for one’s life is a nonessential activity.

“We are in a lot of need”

I exchange letters with asylum seekers in detention as a way of offering emotional support and friendship as they begin their initial hearings. These are our brothers and sisters who are locked in detention with no ability to keep their distance from each other. They lack access to sanitary items and have no control over the contact they have with guards who freely come and go, day after day, wearing no personal protective gear.

Some of the people at risk include an 18-year-old girl separated from her mother and twin brother after fleeing political oppression in Venezuela, and a 62-year-old Guatemalan with pre-existing lung problems who says he is now “in panic” as the numbers of cases within the detention center increase.

A letter sent by two women, one from El Salvador and the other from Cuba, ends with “estamos muy necesitadas” which translates to “we’re in a lot of need.” This simple comment hits me hard. How is it that they have done everything asked of them in this extremely complicated immigration process, and they still are detained with so few resources?

Excerpted from “Estamos muy necesitadas,” by Katherine Smith, West Coast MCC

Restoring asylum protections

Persecution and violence do not stop during a pandemic. Neither does our responsibility to provide safe refuge. Asylum seekers can and should be brought into the U.S. safely by following internationally recognized procedures. The vast majority have family in the U.S. with whom they can stay while they await their day in court. For others, churches and nonprofits stand ready to help.

Policies that restrict entry into the U.S. or send people to unsafe locations should immediately cease. This includes metering, MPP and the ACAs.

In addition to recklessly endangering lives, such policies run contrary to U.S. asylum law. Furthermore, all asylum seekers should have a fair opportunity to present their case in court, lawyers should be provided for unaccompanied children and protections for victims of domestic

violence and gang violence should be fully restored.

The inhumane practice of detaining asylum seekers must end. Alternatives to detention such as the Family Case Management Program ensure 99% of participants show up for court hearings at a fraction of the cost of detention. Another way to save money and help address the large backlogs in immigration courts is to create more legal avenues for people to come to the U.S. for work or to reunite with family.

The debate over asylum policy is fundamentally about whether the U.S. should be a place of safe harbor. Anabaptists and other immigrants who found safety in the U.S. enriched their new communities. The same is true for asylum seekers today. Providing safe refuge is a win-win proposal and the right thing to do. Those who historically benefitted from an open door should remember to keep the door open for the next group needing safe refuge. ✨

Take action at
mcc.org/safe-refuge.

Worship resources

Scripture texts

Genesis 18:1-8; Psalm 91; Hebrews 13:1-3

Prayer for migrants

Dear Jesus,

Our journey through life is long and hard. We cannot make this trip alone; we must walk together on the journey.

You promised to send us a helper, your Spirit. Help us to see your Spirit in those you send to journey with us.

In the refugee family, seeking safety from violence,
Let us see your Spirit.

In the migrant worker, bringing food to our tables,
Let us see your Spirit.

In the asylum-seeker, seeking justice for himself and his family,
Let us see your Spirit.

In the unaccompanied child, traveling in a dangerous world,
Let us see your Spirit.

Teach us to recognize that as we walk with each other, You are present.

Teach us to welcome not only the strangers in our midst but the gifts they bring as well: the invitation to conversion, communion, and solidarity.

This is the help you have sent: we are not alone. We are together on the journey, and for this we give you thanks.

Amen.

—Collected Prayers for Immigrants, Interfaith Worker Justice

Prayer of confession

God, let us not only be grateful if tragedies have escaped us. Let us also be transformed by your grace to repent of ways we are implicated in unjust policies that lead to tragedies upon others. Offer protection to those seeking new life. Amen.

—Rev. Dr. Sharon Stanley-Rea, Disciples Refugee & Immigration Ministries

Sermon ideas

All of us long for safety and refuge. As we seek to become more Christlike, we are called to create places of refuge and welcome for those who are in danger or need. Dina Nayeri writes of her own experience as a refugee in the United States: “It is the obligation of every person born in a safer room to open the door when someone in danger knocks.”

Hebrews 13:2 instructs Jesus’ followers to show hospitality to strangers. The Greek word for hospitality is *philoxenos*, which means love for the stranger. Early followers of Christ understood this mandate to model hospitality and to remember that Christ can come to us in the form of the stranger, the migrant, the refugee.

Songs

Sing the Story 115, “Beauty for brokenness”

Hymnal: A Worship Book 419, “Lead on, O cloud of Presence”

Sing the Story 53, “Here to the house of God we come”

Additional worship resources at mcc.org/safe-refuge.

IMPORTANT ADDRESSES

Senator _____
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510
(202) 224-3121
senate.gov

Representative _____
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515
(202) 224-3121
house.gov

President Donald Trump
The White House
Washington, DC 20500
(202) 456-1111
whitehouse.gov/contact

Please note that congressional offices are still receiving emails and phone calls during this time.

GET INVOLVED!

- Check out our website at washington.mcc.org.
- Sign up to receive **action alerts** and the monthly **E-Memo**.
- Follow us on **Twitter** at twitter.com/mccwashington.

RESOURCES

Visit washington.mcc.org to see current action alerts, our election resource and more.

You can also find topics, guidelines and a resource list for our 2020-2021 High School Public Policy Essay and Video Contest. Deadline for entering is February 26, 2021.

WASHINGTON MEMO is published three times a year by Mennonite Central Committee U.S. Washington Office staff. Subscribe or change your address by sending an email to mccwash@mcc.org or by calling (202) 544-6564.

Staff: Tammy Alexander (Interim Director), Charles Kwuelum and Katerina Parsons.

All biblical quotes are from the New Revised Standard Version, unless otherwise noted.



New construction on the border wall near Lukeville, Arizona. (MCC photo)

SAFE REFUGE DENIED

Asylum seekers, like refugees, are migrants who flee their homes due to a fear of violence or persecution. U.S. and international laws affirm the right to apply for asylum. However, several changes in U.S. immigration policy are preventing asylum seekers from finding safety.



Forced to wait

“Metering”

Restrictions on the number of people who can request asylum at a border crossing each day force people to wait for months, often in shelters or camps, to enter the U.S.

Denied entry

“COVID-19 border closure”

Nearly all asylum seekers are deemed “non-essential” travelers and blocked from entry, rather than being safely admitted using internationally-recognized procedures.

Denied due process

*“PACR/HARP”**

Some asylum seekers must prove their legal cases in 10 days, severely limiting their ability to find a lawyer and gather evidence.

Locked up

“Mandatory detention”

Many asylum seekers are held in detention centers while awaiting their hearing, sometimes for years.

Sent to Mexico

“Remain in Mexico”

“Migrant Protection Protocols”

After applying for asylum, the U.S. sends migrants to Mexico to await their U.S. court hearings. Many face violence and extortion and have no access to lawyers or family.

Sent to other countries

“Asylum Cooperative Agreements”

The U.S. government sends hundreds of asylum seekers to Central American countries where there are not structures in place to keep them safe.

For more information, visit mcc.org/safe-refuge

*PACR/HARP - Prompt Asylum Claim Review/Humanitarian Asylum Review Process

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS



1 Support the Refugee Protection Act (H.R. 5210/S. 2936) and the Asylum Seeker Protection Act (H.R. 2662). The Refugee Protection Act would, among other provisions, prohibit the criminal prosecution of asylum seekers, reduce the use of detention, restore protections for victims of domestic violence and gang violence and provide lawyers for children in immigration court. The Asylum Seeker Protection Act would prohibit the use of funds to implement or enforce policies that send people back to Mexico.

2 End all policies restricting legal access to asylum in the U.S., including metering, the Migrant Protection Protocols, Asylum Cooperative Agreements and the Prompt Asylum Claim Review/Humanitarian Asylum Review Process.

3 End the detention of asylum seekers, a cruel mandate that only increases trauma. Instead, utilize alternatives such as the Family Case Management Program that are far cheaper and proven effective.

4 End funding for border militarization, detention and programs that undermine asylum. Instead, support humanitarian assistance at the border, foreign assistance that addresses the root causes of migration and alternatives to detention.

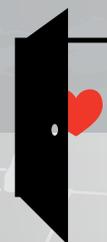
5 Create more avenues for legal immigration for work or family, relieving pressure on the asylum system.



A cross marks the place where migrant Carlos Rafael Montero DeLeon died near the border.



Tent city of asylum seekers in Matamoros, Mexico



Did any of your ancestors flee persecution or violence?

How are churches in your community welcoming asylum seekers and other immigrants?

PROVIDING SAFE REFUGE IS LEGAL, MORAL AND A WIN-WIN

♥ **Asylum is legal.** U.S. and international law recognize the right for people fleeing harm to request asylum. Such laws arose in the aftermath of the Holocaust with a recognition that thousands of people perished after countries refused to give them safe refuge.

♥ **Asylum is moral.** Many ancestors of U.S. citizens fled persecution and violence before coming to the U.S. People seeking refuge today are in no less need of protection.

♥ **Asylum is a win-win.** Asylum seekers and refugees find safety while also contributing to their new communities and helping to revitalize economically depressed areas. Most asylum seekers have family in the U.S. who can support them while they await their day in court.

♥ **Churches are welcoming asylum seekers.** Many local churches and nonprofits are providing food, clothing, transportation and hospitality to arriving migrants who have experienced trauma at home, on the journey and upon arrival to the U.S.