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# IMMIGRANTS IN AMERICA: WHAT EVERY PASTOR NEEDS TO KNOW

By Panravee Vongjaroenrat

**M**aria is from a remote village in Guatemala. She took her children, ages nine and sixteen, on a long trek through Mexico and into the United States to escape her cruel husband. He had beaten her regularly, causing many injuries. One time she suffered a broken rib when he kicked her.

After Maria and her children arrived in the U.S., Maria got work cleaning buildings. But soon after that, the manager asked to see a work permit. She didn't have one, so he fired her. She tried to get work as a housecleaner, but because she didn't speak English, the homeowners wouldn't hire her. The only work she could find was occasional housecleaning and baby-sitting for Spanish-speaking households. Her teenage son, Javier, was tall, strong, and had a mature face. He decided he had to lie and tell people that he was twenty so that he could get work. He did, at a construction site. He became the main provider of the family. They lived well below the poverty level, and Maria's heart ached each time she looked at her son. She wanted him to live and grow up like other sixteen-year-olds—without care and responsibility—and most of all without lies.

One day someone told her about a free immigration service at a church. She went there and could not believe her ears when the

lawyer told her that, because of the abuses she suffered at the hands of her husband, she could ask for protection from the U.S. government so that she could live a normal life here without fear. The lawyer explained the risk: although her case was quite strong, she had not applied for protection within one year of arrival in the U.S., as the law required. She would need to show that there were extraordinary circumstances beyond her control justifying the delay, and if her application was denied, she and her children would be sent back to Guatemala.

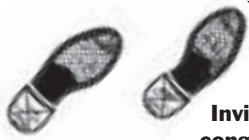
Maria was distressed. She did not know what she would do if she were forced to return to Guatemala. She talked to her children, especially Javier. They thought about it a long time because they were so afraid of returning to Guatemala. In the end, they decided to take the risk and come forward to apply for asylum. Maria and Javier did what they could to get the necessary information for the lawyer. Her lawyer worked with her a great deal before the interview, asking Maria and Javier to describe the

past and the beatings in great detail. She asked them to describe their feelings. All told, Maria and her children probably spent thirty to forty hours with the lawyer to complete the application and prepare for the interview.

On the day of the interview, despite all the preparation with the lawyer, Maria and Javier still felt the horror and distress of reliving those days when she was regularly beaten. However, thanks to the careful work of the lawyer, Maria was granted asylum protection and work authorization. She was able to get a steady job with a decent income and labor protection—all of which were not available to her before she got her legal status.

Maria's story is based on the true life experiences of an immigrant family whose life was turned around by a special ministry of the United Methodist Church called Justice for Our Neighbors (JFON). Related to the refugee resettlement ministry, JFON is a program of the United Methodist Committee on Relief. Its mission is to be "a faith-driven ministry welcoming immigrants into our churches and community by providing free, high-quality immigration legal services, education, and advocacy." Recognizing that today's immigration law is highly complicated, restrictive, and harsh and that immigrants face manifold obstacles in understanding the law and navigating it, the United Methodist Church initiated JFON to help those who cannot afford any legal help. Each year, JFON helps more than 2,000 low-income immigrants who might otherwise have missed their opportunity to gain legal status or who become victims of unscrupulous practitioners out to take advantage of them.

Immigration is a complex issue, and while many opponents of immigration have communicated their views loudly and clearly, the majority of the U.S. population is more moderate on the issue, with views ranging from slight disfavor to neutrality to slight favor. Given this fact, we face the danger of the national policy being lopsidedly shaped by a highly vocal minority. Allowing the voice of anger and hatred to lead policy-making gives us unjust and ineffective laws. Recent examples can be found in the current immigration law, "overhauled" in 1996.



## Action Step

Invite an immigration attorney to speak to your congregation about immigration law and policy.

The American Immigration Lawyers Association (AILA) is a private association of immigration attorneys in the U.S. and around the world. Their website, [www.aila.org](http://www.aila.org), allows a search for immigration attorneys in a given community. Additionally, JFON has a network of qualified immigration attorneys in nine states and Washington, D.C. and is constantly growing. More information on JFON is available at [www.justiceforourneighbors.org](http://www.justiceforourneighbors.org) or by calling 240-450-1186.

Under the law today, we are seeing many long-term legal residents of this country being deported for minor offenses even though their family members may be U.S. citizens. Many immigrant families today are made up of some who are undocumented members and some who are U.S. citizens. Under the law, the undocumented members are subject to deportation, regardless of its effects on the U.S. citizens in the family. Families are broken up and torn apart every day while the community around them finds it difficult to understand how such drastic and inhumane measures could solve our immigration problems.

These measures create more social ills because they wreak punishment and vengeance not only on those who may have violated the immigration law but on the whole community surrounding each family. In fact, several of our lawmakers who

voted for the current law have expressed through various means their astonishment at and concerns over the unintended consequences of the law.

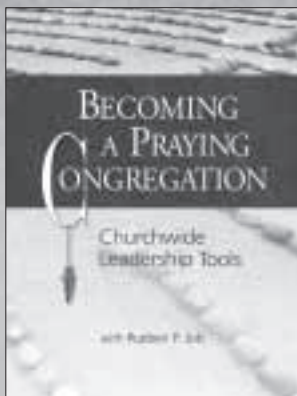
As spiritual leaders, pastors should consider the issue very carefully and seek out as much information as possible. Unfortunately, so many myths and misunderstandings abound in the area of immigration. Additionally, because the immigrant stories and motivations are as varied and diverse as the people, we must be careful to make immigration policy decisions that are based not only on statistics and numbers but also on individual stories, circumstances, and needs. Pastors can help their flocks learn more about their immigrant neighbors and get to know the realities of immigration by organizing bridge-building activities such as international potlucks, immigrant film screenings and discussions, Bible studies, and educational sessions on immigration. The path to justice for our poor and transient neighbors begins with deeper understanding. □



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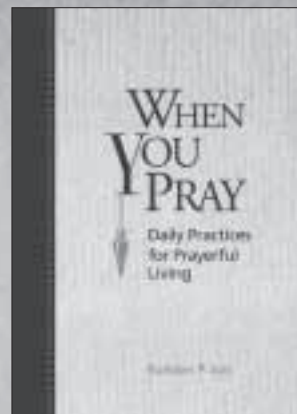
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