SHALOM!
A JOURNAL FOR THE PRACTICE OF RECONCILIATION
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Caring for Immigrants and Refugees

THIS IS THE sixth time that *Shalom!* has focused on immigrants and/or refugees and our response to them—previous editions were published in 2000, 2006, 2012, 2014, and 2016, making it one of the topics that has been addressed most frequently over the course of *Shalom!*'s forty-five-year history. That frequency is evidence of how thorny the issue has been for decades, with no US administration being able to resolve it.

Despite the impression one gets from the media that the undocumented population in the US has grown significantly, it has actually held fairly steady in the range of eleven million; the number entering the US illegally actually declined from 2023 to 2024. As of May 2024, there were 43.4 million refugees around the world. In 2023, about 60,000 refugees were admitted to the US, which amounts to .13 percent of the total. In addition, there were 6.9 million asylum seekers in the world. In 2023, the US granted asylum to about 54,000 people or .78 percent of the total.

During the days I was preparing this edition, I watched two webinars addressing current federal actions that affect both undocumented immigrants and those who have come or were hoping to come to the US as refugees. The first, sponsored by Mennonite Central Committee, focused on how to support immigrants in a time of increased immigration enforcement, family separation, and racial discrimination. The second was sponsored by the Harrisburg, PA office of Church World Service (CWS) which has recently had 85 percent of its funding suddenly frozen by the federal government. Even though the freeze was reversed, the funding has not yet been restored in full. Seventy percent of the CWS staff nationally has been furloughed (amounting to forty-three out of fifty-four in Harrisburg). Recently-arrived refugees do not have access to the promised ninety days of federal funding to help them get settled in their new land.

In this environment, what is the church's responsibility? What should Christians who understand that "welcoming strangers" is like doing it for Jesus himself do? Those questions are what the stories in this edition of *Shalom!* seek to answer.

Doctors Without Borders offer medical care to people regardless of where they live or who they are. Can we be Christians without borders in our posture toward immigrants, even those who break laws to come to our country? We can offer practical help: food, clothing, shelter, jobs, legal assistance, language lessons. We can try to understand the root causes for migration: what are the circumstances they felt compelled to flee? We can be caring, kind, generous, empathetic, loving, and merciful. We can advocate for public policies that are just and compassionate, address root causes, and treat people as we would want to be treated even if we broke the law. Perhaps most importantly, we can remember that they are equally loved by God and deserve our compassion, understanding, and care.

Harriet S. Bicksler, editor

THIS ISSUE OF *SHALOM!*

Responding to the Immigration Crisis 2

Stories from an Immigration Attorney 3

For I Was Hungry, and You Gave Me Something to Eat 4

English Language Learning 6

A Ministry in Refugee Resettlement 7

MIDNIGHT MUSINGS
Three Biblical Teachings. 8

Oriented Towards Justice 9

Citizenship: Pathway or Obstacle 10

BOOK REVIEW
Solito: A Memoir 12

Responding to the Immigration Crisis

By Mike Holland

THROUGHOUT HISTORY, THERE have been movements of people around the world. This movement of people is called migration and can be for just a short period of time, like a harvest season. When people come into a new country to stay with or without legal status it is called immigration. Social sciences have shown that when people move to a new location where they have left their familiar surroundings and social relational supports, they are more open to new relationships and ideas including the gospel. I believe this is especially true when cultural and linguistic barriers are crossed. This opens up special opportunities for service and evangelism.

The study of Christian ministry to migrants is called diaspora missiology. The word diaspora comes from the Greek word to scatter. One example is in the parable of the sower (Luke 8:5-15) when the sower scatters the seed on the four soils. The scattering of Jews and other people around the world and in the nations has historically been called diaspora. Diaspora missiology is the field of study that looks at the implications and opportunities that the migration of people around the world has for the Great Commission or gospel impact.

Push and pull

There are many reasons why people leave their country. These are the "push" of migration. There are also many reasons why people go to another country. These are the "pull." The push could include violence in your neighborhood or country. One time I met a Honduran woman whose teenage daughter was raped by a gang of local teenagers in her community. She immediately packed up her two daughters and ran across several countries and came to the border of the United States. Unfortunately, the daughter who had been raped was detained and sent back home because she was eighteen. The mother, with the other daughter because she was a minor, was able to get a sponsor and come to Pennsylvania. They only stayed for a few months because the mother wanted to get back to the other daughter who needed her help.

Other factors of push could include finances or medical care. I once met an Argentinian man working in Venezuela. I said, "I can't imagine leaving your family behind to come and work in Venezuela." He answered, "Yes it's very difficult, but it was more difficult sitting at the table and not having anything to give my children to eat." Another family came to work in Pennsylvania because their child had a heart condition that could not be treated in their home country.

So when we talk about the "pull" of immigration or diaspora, where there is violence pushing them out, or people are looking for a place, being pulled, where there is security, safety and peace. Here in our area of Pennsylvania, for example, we often don't lock the doors of our houses. We regularly don't lock our cars. Many people can't imagine this level of safety. When we lived in Caracas, Venezuela, you couldn't leave anything unlocked or it would disappear.

When people think of a place to go, if they have a friend or a relative who lives in a safe environment, they decide that's where they want to go. Many times people come to America because they've heard of many blessings of life here. They have often seen cars and houses and tables full of food in movies that show the prosperity of life in this country. They are aware of more economic, housing, medical, educational, and other kinds of security than where they are.

A diaspora testimony

A little over a year ago, our first Venezuelan family came to Luz, Alegria y Esperanza (Light, Joy and Hope) Brethren in Christ Church, where I pastor in York Springs, Pennsylvania. They had made an eight-month trek from Venezuela by land through Panama, up Central America to Mexico, and then across the border to the US. Through the dangers of this journey, the woman experienced much anxiety. The Lord kept bringing Christians to help them along their way and through their kindness she received Christ and experienced healing from her trauma. When they arrived in our town, they kept bumping into people from our church who helped them find jobs and invited them to church. They came and a few weeks later the husband had many questions answered and gave his life to Christ. On Easter Sunday 2024, they were baptized and now host a Bible study (cell group) in their home.

Responses to the current immigration situation

Many people have reached out to me to offer encouragement and ask how our people are doing. Here are a few of my thoughts about the impact of current Immigration and Customs Enforcement efforts on our faith community and others. I have been surprised, and I'm sure you will be too, by the attitudes of people in our church. The re-

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sponses of our people don't reflect the attitudes at large but there are more people expressing these attitudes than I would have expected. The faith component, trusting in God, seems to be a key factor and makes a huge difference.

One of the first attitudes I hear our people expressing is a confidence in God, trusting that he will care for them. He has cared for them in the past and will continue to care and provide for them now and into the future no matter what life brings. I find this amazing and wonderful. Another perspective has been that they know they've broken the law and are willing to face the consequences. If they have to go, they have to go, and will go cooperatively. A number have said they are grateful to God and this country for all they have accomplished. They have achieved much and with the resources they have would be able to restart their lives back home.

A third response has been with our church in Mifflintown where several families have recently lost their jobs. They have decided to return to their countries of origin now before they have to go through the trauma of being arrested and deported. This is an unexpected response that I believe will create an element of reverse flow across the border.

Fourth, people are limiting unnecessary risks—especially driving. Our people are still going to work and sending their children to school, but if they don't have a license, they're asking for rides to avoid extra exposure. This is a healthy response and makes a lot of sense. Rather than driving to Walmart and saving a few dollars, they'll walk to the local Mexican store across the street.

A fifth response among our people has been a wave of expressions of concern and anger with abuses and injustices. People are frequently reposting video clips and posts of people who are being arrested or mistreated. This has sparked much focus and many spontaneous prayers in our church prayer times. Our people pray for protection for the needy and the alignment and adjustments of lawmakers and law enforcers that respect the dignity of all people whether they have legal documentation or not. There is a lot of uncertainty and waiting to see about statuses being eliminated. People who have papers wonder if their status will be eliminated (for example Temporary Protected Status).

Trusting God

We teach our people that only God can perfectly balance justice and mercy. Humans tend to lean one way or another. We want and need justice but we also want and need mercy. We want our government to administer justice and protect the people in our country and communities, but we also want the government to discern clearly who has brought danger and violence and who has brought blessing and positive contributions to society, the country,and the community.

We instruct our people to check their hearts and their attitudes. We can talk about the same situation or incident in ways that are helpful and ways that are not. We say: "Are you speaking in a spirit that encourages fear and anxiety or a spirit that encourages trust and peace?" The second honors God and blesses people. We want to be an encouragement and a support and instruments of love to all with whom we have contact.

Mike Holland *is pastor of Luz, Alegria y Esperanza Brethren in Christ Church, York Springs, PA, and serves as the Hispanic ministries facilitator for the Susquehanna Conference.*

Stories from an Immigration Attorney

By Rachel Diaz

I HAVE BEEN an immigration attorney for almost twenty years. I work with Mennonite Central Committee East Coast in South Florida serving the immigrant community in our Anabaptist churches. What a job this is! The only way I can do it is knowing I am serving God as I serve immigrants in our country. This work is complex, continually changing, and frustrating. Reform is needed, but that is for the politicians to figure out and get done.

Throughout the years, I have heard the life stories of so many people. Through their stories, I have seen the images of lives lived. I am a part of their stories, and they are part of mine. They are etched in the storybook of my life.

One of those stories is Miriam. She called the office very happy because she was finally eligible to apply for a work permit. Asylum seekers must wait 150 days after applying for asylum to apply for a work permit. Those 150 days are 3,600 hours, 216,000 minutes. It's a slow painful crawl to day 150.

That Wednesday was day 150, or so she thought. The formal counting is done by the Executive Office of Immigration Review (EOIR). By their count, she was only on day 21, because the count had been stopped at day 21 for over six months. She was 129 days away from a work permit. That is 3,096 hours, 185,760 minutes. Having to wait 129 more days was excruciating.

Miriam was sobbing. Her sobbing was intense; it was sobbing that sprung from the marrow of her soul. It gave me goosebumps. Her pain pressed on my chest like a bowling ball.

Through tears and short breaths, she said, "Look at my hands." She held out her hands. Her fingers were curled up like she was holding a grapefruit. Her hands and fingers were swollen and stiff; they were pale. She said, "My job is standing for twelve hours in a cooler-like factory handling frozen chickens readying them for packing." Not really knowing what to say, I said, "Don't you wear gloves?"

Applying for a work permit was her way out of that job and hope for a warmer and better paying job. Day 150 was a long way away. I swallowed the knot in my throat, and said, "Let's pray." I gripped her hands and feeling the bowling ball weight of her pain on my chest, I cried out and said, "God, look at these hands!" And I continued praying, "God, in the name of Jesus, give her peace,

comfort and health." The image of her hands is carved in my mind and written in the storybook of my life.

All the stories are long and convoluted. My work requires a good mix of compassion with discernment when listening. I cannot be naïve. Not everyone tells the truth; not everyone is doing what is right. I am the person who has those difficult conversations with people.

I think of Wilmer. He entered the country illegally in 2012. He was detained at the border and deported. Eleven days later, he came back, and that time he was undetected when entering the country. He was in the country for seven years when he was arrested for driving under the influence (DUI) and without a valid driver's license.

After being released from jail for the DUI, he did not show up to criminal court, so now there was a warrant for his arrest. A couple of years later, he was pulled over and charged for driving without a valid driver's license. When the police officer looked him up, he saw Wilmer had an outstanding warrant. He was arrested. Because of his undocumented status and the illegal entries into the United States, he was held in immigration detention for four months. Once he was released, he started to work on completing the court-imposed sentence: community hours, fees, and a drug and alcohol course. He was given an appointment with an Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officer. At this point in his immigrant story, he reached out to me.

I said, "You need to do what the ICE officer said and what you said to the officer you would do. You will have to return to your country." This was the truth I had to give him. I knew saying this was not what he wanted to hear. It was painful to say and devastating to him and his family.

My work extends into other areas. My clients need help and they trust me and ask me for help. So, I help with government assistance applications, condo paperwork, and school issues with their children. I am more than their immigration attorney.

A couple from Afghanistan were my clients, Ibrahim and Mehria. They were both twenty-one years old. They had a beautiful little girl who had been born in the United States. By the grace of God, their paperwork did not take as long as it usually does. They are adjusting to life in the United States and to being parents. Their daughter is a beautiful eighteen-month-old. She has big cheeks and wavy, wild jet-black hair.

One day they came to the office. When we were done with the reason why they were at the office, Ibrahim asked timidly as he pointed at his daughter, "Can you look at her hair? She has white things." Lice! I thought. My head started to itch. I did not want to inspect this little girl's hair. And then he said, "We are alone here. We do not have our parents or family to help us." They held that little girl in front of me as I went through her hair. At that moment, I was not their immigration attorney. I was standing in for his mother. What a privilege.

What we can do and need to do is serve, pray, and be available. We need to serve immigrants and do it with compassion and discernment. We need to pray for immigrants like Miriam, Wilmer, and Ibrahim and his family. We need to be available for immigrants and the needs that go beyond the expected. All this we can do for God's honor and glory and for his kingdom.

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For I Was Hungry, and You Gave Me Something to Eat

By Jason Dueck

PASTOR VICTOR LAMPON Leon says he knows the story sounds a bit fantastical when people ask how his work supporting migrants began, Fifteen years ago, Lampón was coming home from work in Mexico City, when a train passed nearby. He noticed a large group of people, riding not from the safety of a passenger car, but dangerously perched on top of the moving train — a common sight across Mexico.

"Right then, God spoke to me and told me that I was going to work with migrants," says Lampón.

But at that time, he didn't know what really helping them looked like.

He found out that the train he'd seen made a stop in the nearby municipality of Tultitlán. So, he, his wife Rocio Valencia Islas and some members of their church collected food, water and clothes and brought them to hand out to migrants near the train station. One of the first groups they met had come from El Salvador and included an older man who kept asking them for shoes.

"We gave him food, we gave him water, we gave him the shoes that he wanted," says Lampón.

"And the man said to us, 'You saw me naked, and you gave me something to wear. You saw me hungry, and you gave me something to eat. You saw me thirsty, and you gave me something to drink. This is what the Bible says.'"

Since that day, Lampón has never doubted his calling.

Today, he and his wife lead a church that revolves around providing respite, attention and care to migrants passing through Ecatepec, a town just outside of Mexico City. MCC has provided support to the ministry, La Mano de Dios en Apoyo al Migrante or Hand of God in Support of Migrants, for the past three years.

The space they have is small — five bunk beds and a single bed completely fill one room, while the one car garage-sized remainder hosts church services, meals, additional guests and whatever else the ministry requires. Lampón says the most they've ever hosted for night was 48, but 35 to 40 is typical. Women and children double up on the

beds when needed, turning 11 spots into 22, and the church puts down sleeping mats anywhere else someone could lay their head for the night.

One woman, 48, whose name is not provided for security reasons, has slept in one of those beds every night for the last seven months. The process of applying for asylum in the US can take months or even years, so

long stays at the shelter are common. She is migrating from Cuba to join her husband who successfully migrated to Iowa two years ago. She heard about this church from a woman she met earlier in her journey and says she could never have imagined how well she's been treated during her stay here.

"They've really helped me in everything. They treat me as their family," she says. "I don't have anyone. I am literally alone on this journey. I don't have any help. They've helped me. I've gotten sick and the pastor has offered help at any hour, saying, 'You can stay here until you get your [asylum] appointment. Don't worry, you have food, you have shelter, you have clothing.'"

Because migrants are both mobile and vulnerable, it's hard for agencies to effectively estimate their total numbers.

Most official guesses put the migrant population in Mexico at around 1.5 million, but it's almost certainly much higher.

And it's not only migrants from other parts of Latin America making the difficult journey. Migrants from all over the world—Ukraine, Haiti, Sudan, Afghanistan, and countless other countries—visit these shelters on their journey to the southern US border.

Just a decade ago, there were few, if any, churches in Mexico operating shelters. But since 2018, Lampón says, many churches have seen how overwhelmed the government shelters had become and could not ignore Jesus's clear call to care for the stranger. Now, church-supported shelters make up a significant percentage of the sector.

And for those like Lampón on the outskirts of Mexico City or Consuelo Martinez, who works in Juárez, this isn't just about meeting essential needs. Shelter, food and water are vital, but their ministry is to care for those staying with them in as many aspects as possible.

Just a few miles from the US-Mexico border crossing into El Paso, Texas, in a small, converted warehouse, Martinez starts each day at 3 a.m. She and two other members of the team at Oasis del Migrante (Migrant Oasis) have filled the small storage area between the office and kitchen with all the equipment they need to prep, fry and decorate more than 300 doughnuts a day, topping them with icing in flavors like chocolate, maple glaze and hazelnut.

By 5 a.m., the doughnuts are ready, and

migrants from Oasis pick them up and take them to sell on street corners across the city. Many sell on corners where regulars come by every morning, craving the sweet treats that aren't common elsewhere in Juárez. Most will sell their lot within an hour, earning profits they can keep to sustain themselves or their families. "We see it as entrepreneurship for the migrants," says Martinez. "Some of them have jobs, but one way we can be a blessing is by offering them work, ways to make themselves some money."

Martinez is very familiar with how hard it can be to find work as a migrant. Born in Honduras, she lived in the US some twenty years ago but was doing so without documentation. She and her husband had three children in the US before they divorced. Martinez decided to go back to her family in Honduras with the children.

Two years ago, with her children aged 17, 16 and 11, she began the process of returning to the US. That path ultimately led her to Juárez, waiting on her appointment at the border without knowing when it might come. A friend introduced her to Pastor Roman Dominguez, who oversees Oasis, and she was welcomed into the shelter.

"But something changed when I started serving here," says Martinez. "I felt within myself peace, like I feel good here, maybe this is okay.

"The pastor, everyone, said I would feel different when I got my visa appointment, but I didn't think I would. And then the day came, and I got my appointment, and I went over to the States with my kids, and I just didn't feel good, I didn't feel at peace."

So, the family came back to Juárez, and Martinez joined Oasis as the shelter coordinator. Her US-born children can cross the border on foot to attend school in El Paso, while she spends her days working to help migrants on journeys like hers. That doesn't mean every day is easy—even with being up before the sun, she's often not in bed until 10 p.m. But she knows she's where she's supposed to be.

"I really believe that I was born to serve, and so here I am. Even though it's been difficult, it's been very fulfilling for me. Knowing that I'm helping others and serving others has really filled me with a lot of peace. I feel very good about what I'm doing."

Jason Dueck *is communications specialist for MCC Canada. Reprinted by permission from MCC.*

Photo captions:

Top left: *Second from left, pastors Victor Lampón Leon and Rocio Valencia Islas prepare arepas, with migrant residents at La Mano de Dios en Apoyo al Migrante (God's Hand in Support of Migrants) in Ecatepec, Mexico.*

Middle: *Second from left, pastors Victor Lampón Leon and Rocio Valencia Islas prepare arepas, with migrant residents at La Mano de Dios en Apoyo al Migrante (God's Hand in Support of Migrants) in Ecatepec, Mexico.*

English Language Learning in Harrisburg

By Wendell Zercher

FORTY-FIVE YEARS ago the Harrisburg Brethren in Christ Church was a small city church of fewer than one hundred worshipers. We somehow learned that Church World Service was asking for help with the resettlement of Eritrean refugees. Eritrea is a small East African country wedged between Ethiopia and the Red Sea. At the time there were armed Eritrean groups that were fighting for independence, causing many to flee the violence. As a result, refugee camps began to form in places outside their borders.

Much like Rhoda Lee of Kansas who boldly and insistently challenged the reticent brethren at the 1894 General Conference to begin sending out missionaries to foreign lands, one Harrisburg church woman rose to exhort our congregation to consider this call for help. We did so, and as a result six church families took a big step and agreed to open their homes to Eritrean refugees.

Today, from our perspective in 2025, it is astounding to think back to 1980 and realize the stark differences between then and now. Our discussion then was actually quite easy and uncomplicated since we were largely guided by the scriptures. We read passages of the Bible such as Leviticus 19:33 where God directs his people not to mistreat foreigners. Instead, they should be treated as your "native-born." In Hebrews 13:2, Paul exhorts the church, "Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it." These are familiar passages to most of us, making it relatively easy for us to welcome the Eritreans.

Our discussions were not complicated by the unkind and often false rhetoric that we are constantly bombarded with today. The issue of immigration and refugees is currently painfully hyper-politicized. Thankfully, we chose the path of love and compassion in 1980 and made every effort to treat the Eritreans as we would our own brothers and sisters.

Our six church families were able to accept three women and five men, and by June they began to arrive. We welcomed them into our homes to begin new lives. Much needed to be done: learning English, registering with appropriate state agencies, making and actually getting to medical and dental appointments, seeking job training, learning to use the transportation system, and on and on. Although a lot of work, we were pleased to encounter few unpleasant surprises and our new friends integrated well into our family settings and became part of family life.

Within a short time, they were busy attending English classes, taking care of all their health needs, and finding work. They eventually developed contacts with other Eritreans in the Harrisburg area and beyond. By the year's end, most became independent, finding other living arrangements and moving on.

During their stay with us, we heard personal stories such as how they escaped the danger of life in Eritrea. The young woman who lived with us recounted her harrowing experience of fleeing to Sudan by camel. Assimilating into American culture was also often a bit rough. One man was taken to a men's clothing store to buy new pants, and he soon found a pair he liked. He was told to try them on first to make sure they fit, so he immediately dropped his pants, creating quite an impression on those nearby!

The host families in general felt gratified by the cross-cultural experience and were enriched by our time together. We enjoyed relationships that in some cases lasted for years. We were pleased that we were able to make a difference, however small, in the lives of our Eritrean friends.

Since 1980 we have grown into a much larger church with a successful transition to achieving our goal of becoming a diverse, multi-ethnic urban church. Many of our programs minister to "the stranger" as we host events throughout the year for children and families in our neighborhood and beyond. We have for years operated a food pantry run by a group of very dedicated volunteers, meaningfully fulfilling a need for those struggling to get by. And we have held ESL (English as a Second Language) classes for nearly twenty years, initiated and run by volunteer teachers and support staff.

The immigrant population in the Harrisburg area has grown fast over the years. Children quickly become immersed in school and consequently improve their English skills amazingly fast. However, their parents struggle to learn the language and therefore have difficulty communicating with their children's school teachers, doctors, boss, the bank and other services, store personnel, and on and on. Most adults work during the day and have little opportunity to acquire any English skills. Consequently, offering English classes in the evening is their best opportunity to learn. It also satisfies an often critical need to socialize.

By far the most common language spoken by our students is Spanish. They come from many of the Central and South American countries. Over time, speakers of many other languages have joined us from countries in Asia and Africa. Two things that most learners seem to have in common are that they are quite motivated and are tired after a long day of manual labor. The students are very appreciative and are a joy to teach. We also learn much from them.

I personally have been teaching the most advanced students for over ten years. It is standard practice not to ask students if they are documented. However, I am happy to listen to whatever they would like to share. Jose (not his real name), a young man from Honduras who has attended the advanced class for years, confided that he has illegally entered the US three times. Each time he has no choice but to again pay someone thousands of dollars to help him re-enter. He works in a pizza shop and is "paid under the table." He is a very industrious, determined man, working very long hours six days a week.

A couple months ago Jose confided before class that he is very upset since he had for a long time been planning to buy the shop from his boss, the owner. The two of them had a verbal agreement that Jose would

buy the shop at a certain price. However, the owner informed him that instead he was going to sell to someone else who offered more money. Jose was crushed, but of course had no way to hold the owner to their agreement since Jose has no legal standing as an undocumented person. Being vulnerable to any unscrupulous person is an all-too-common experience for undocumented workers.

Another student, Belinda (not her real name) is from Peru. She is married and the mother of two boys. She and her husband are often subjected to racial discrimination, intolerance, and derision. Often when her husband goes to the bank and talks to a teller, he is told in a cold and dismissive manner that she cannot understand him, so just go away. He is humiliated and embarrassed. Also, Belinda likes to drive out to a nearby park to exercise and walk her dog. She keeps the dog on a leash and carefully picks up after him. However, because she looks Latina, almost immediately a man from an adjacent house comes out to stand belligerently in his yard and stare threateningly at her until she leaves. Regretfully, this kind of hateful attitude is all too prevalent. As a teacher, I listen with sadness and am ashamed that people in my country can be so unkind.

Particularly galling is the fact that churches of today are extremely divided. We seem to be unable to agree on what the Bible seems to say quite clearly. In Deuteronomy 10:19, God tells his people to remember that they themselves were once foreigners in Egypt, so they should love those who are foreigners. We need to do that together.

Wendell Zercher *is a retired museum curator and attends the Harrisburg (PA) Brethren in Christ Church. He lives at Messiah Lifeways, Mechanicsburg, PA.*

A Ministry in Refugee Resettlement

By Tim Sietman

WHEN MY FAMILY suddenly returned home to Dayton, Ohio from China due to Covid, we didn't know we would become closely involved in refugee resettlement. I've written part of that story here to encourage you to support ministries, services, and policies that favor refugees and immigrants.

Before I left China, an Afghan friend of mine and I had already been working on a business project. When Covid took me back to the US, he was already in Kabul starting the new company. Then in the summer of 2021, Kabul fell to the Taliban, and my friend's family encouraged him to flee. As a religious and ethnic minority, he would be targeted. When the Taliban militia entered the city, they began searching for him by name and he went into hiding. The US still held the airbase, and thousands fled to the perimeter, seeking the protection promised to them in return for their service. My friend was there among the surging crowds, looking up to the soldiers patrolling above them on the security barriers, hoping they would be let in. We prayed and prayed. We lost contact and gave up hope. And then one morning we received word that he had been allowed inside the walls and would be evacuated.

My friend and his brother were eventually resettled to Dayton, and it was an amazing reunion. They lived in my home for a few months. We spent that time joyfully—they made Afghan breakfasts for us, they fed our cats hot dogs, they chopped firewood by my house, and they taught my kids how to say "Good morning" and "Thank you" in Dari. Their refugee resettlement case workers came and visited from time to time. As we watched this process, our eyes were opened to the larger program of refugee resettlement.

Eventually, those Afghan brothers moved to another city for work, and I wanted to get more involved in helping refugees. I learned that one way to volunteer is to welcome refugees when they first arrive at our local airport. My family and I started volunteering in this way.

As we grew closer to the refugee community in our area, we learned even more about their situation. We realized how many refugees there are around the world, waiting in camps, waiting in countries they will never be able to call home, waiting for the United Nations to recognize their refugee status, waiting for some country to accept them for resettlement, waiting for medical checks, waiting for security screenings, waiting and waiting. Years flow by for these people—years apart from family, years apart from wives, husbands, and children. People who had gone through all this became our friends.

Learning all this upset me. I felt that no one should be separated from home and family for so long. God would not be happy with that. I wanted to do more to help, if I could.

Around that time about two years ago, I heard about a new government program called Welcome Corps that would allow individuals to form private sponsor groups and sponsor refugees. Inspired by this, I formed a team with my wife and several friends. Six months later, the family arrived and our team went into action.

This sponsorship process exposed us to the complex system of immigration regulations and government programs that refugees must navigate once they are here. We learned that applying for local, state, and federal benefits is a stressful and unforgiving process. With little to no income, it's difficult to obtain safe, adequate housing. Even with work authorization, it's normally months before most can find their first job. Initially, many don't speak English well enough to satisfy most employers. They certainly aren't able to show the required three or so months of income most landlords require. The housing available to people in this kind of situation is often the province of slum lords: unsafe facilities, poorly maintained, and in dangerous neighborhoods. As they use up the initial government program money designated for refugees, they quickly need to transition to welfare programs: Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, Medicaid, food stamps, etc. To maintain access to these benefits, they have to attend English classes or other job training programs, even while they search for work and care for family. As they try to navigate these complex

programs, it's easy to grow suspicious that this overall system is not working in their favor.

Slowly, however, they learn to advocate for themselves. Small ethnic communities spring up: churches are started, mosques form, ethnic groceries open, businesses launch. As these communities form, they often remain segregated from the mass culture that flows around them. As foreigners in a foreign land, they spend years here, and yet may feel like they don't really have any "American" friends. With few connections that bridge from their culture to others, they often know little about resources and opportunities that I might take for granted. I've learned that one of their greatest needs is simply to have more friends that bridge between their minority culture and the mass culture of the US. Friends can introduce newcomers to professionals in their industries, education opportunities, social programs, and much more.

In spite of these obstacles, I have witnessed how my friends gracefully bear their challenges and rise to overcome them. Then they start to give back—helping the homeless, starting neighborhood associations, starting non-profits to help others access healthcare, becoming police officers, and so on. They become a dynamic, energizing part of our cities and communities. Through my friendships, I have become convinced that these newcomer—refugees and immigrants—are destined to be one of the most dynamic forces that God uses to bring healing and blessing to our cities. It is true that newcomers need our help, but more than that, I truly believe that we need them.

Tomorrow, I'll keep helping my immigrant brothers and sisters. I'll be at the airport when they arrive. I'll offer financial support for housing. I'll sponsor them to come here and help them learn to do the same for their family members. I'll attend their citizenship ceremonies. I'll build connections between their communities and mine.

I'll be doing this work in Dayton. Will you join me in the same work wherever you are?

Tim Sietman *and his family live in Dayton, OH and attends East Dayton Fellowship. Tim volunteers with refugees through Catholic Social Services and leads a refugee private group under the federal Welcome Corps program. He works full-time for a language education company called TalkAbroad.*

Three Biblical Teachings

By Zach Spidel

I WAS APPROACHED at my grandfather's funeral by a family member who knew that I had recently begun church planting work in an economically distressed neighborhood of Dayton, Ohio. This relative, whom I had not seen in some years, began asking me with a tone of concern (even disapproval) about my work during the long lull of the visitation hour. At first, I did not understand what lay behind his tone—what concern or objection could he have? Eventually, however, he made the reason for his concern clear.

"Are you gonna be screening people, making sure you don't help anybody that's here illegally?" he began, with a whispered urgency in that inappropriate moment, to tell me how important it was that I not help anyone who didn't deserve it and especially not illegal immigrants. This relative lived very near the southern border and had flown in for the funeral. He was a first-hand witness to significant amounts of illegal border-crossings and to problems created by them. Some of what he had seen and lived through was genuinely difficult, scary, and upsetting.

Though he is a person I love, it is accurate to say that he had no compassion for those desperate border crossers. What he felt, it seemed to me, was anger—enough anger that he was distressed at the thought that I might end up helping such people in my ministry, distressed enough that he felt compelled to bring up the topic at my grandfather's funeral! This was before the current political moment, before Donald Trump's first presidential run that focused so much attention on illegal immigration, and yet, looking back, so much about the current moment was telegraphed for me in that painful and ill-timed encounter.

I don't judge that relative. God knows the burdens he's borne and what mitigating factors in his life or soul may explain that level of misdirected anger. Nor do I wish to judge anyone who has concerns about immigration more broadly; it is a topic that most Americans, if surveys can be trusted, are worried about. But I also don't want to fail to think Christianly about those fellow human beings who find themselves here without having been born here: those who have come or those who were brought, those who are here via legal channels or via illegal ones, or those who had a legal status that lapsed. How does Christ regard these people and how would he have us—his church—relate to them?

Answering a question like that requires the right heuristic: which biblical teaching or teachings might be most salient here? There are three biblical teachings—one from the Old Testament and two straight from Christ's lips that I believe provide guidance for the best lense through which to consider this topic.

First, the Old Testament is replete with examples of God's people mistaking God's election of them as a preference for their bloodline or earthly-nation status. Again and again, God shows them otherwise. He commands them to accept and care for the foreigners and resident aliens among them, treating them like native-born people because they too were once foreigners in a foreign land (e.g. Lev. 19:33-34). He brings up a mixed multitude of desperate Egyptians

alongside the children of Abraham during the Exodus, apparently folding these people into Israel (Ex. 12:37-38). This folding of earthly foreigners into Israel is, in fact, a theme throughout the Old Testament. Rahab (a Canaanite woman), Ruth (a Moabitess), and Obed-Edom (a Gittite) all assumed prominent places in the history of God's people. God has made one human race and has concern for all. God is out to build one Church that knows no boundaries of race, nationality, language, or culture, and members of that church are called to care about their one true citizenship in God's Kingdom, using whatever earthly citizenship they happen to have to advance their true home country's purposes.

Second, Jesus teaches us that we are to serve him by serving whomever we encounter in need, in particular the poor, the naked, the sick, the hungry, the imprisoned, and the vulnerable. Luke 10 and Matthew 25 teach this with special clarity, but the message is hard to miss if one reads the Gospels! There is nothing in Jesus's ministry (in which he crossed multiple borders others did not think should be crossed—between Jewish and Samaritan lands, between Jewish and Hellenic ones) that would suggest that he thinks his people should refrain from helping others because of a legal status they hold under an earthly system. If there is a person in need, whatever their legal status, helping them is the same as serving Jesus. Immigrants and refugees are often in highly vulnerable, difficult, and needy situations. As Christ's people we are called, I believe, to love and serve them without regard to labels or statuses applied to them in earthly systems and without regard to whether they have broken a law. God knows I am a terrible law breaker too!

Third, one of Jesus's most iconic teachings —one probably invoked too easily in some cases—seems to me to apply well here: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." The Golden Rule. Many (most, the vast majority?) of illegal immigrants in the United States did not come here on a lark or without great hardship. It was significant need or significant danger that drove them here. They are people in trouble, without a proper home, in great need and without much protection. They are people who are regularly lied about and vilified on the basis of a very small number of outlier cases. To get to know one of their stories and then wonder, "If I were in their position right now, what might I like another person to do for me," could lead you toward acts of assistance, hospitality, advocacy, and friendship —using personal, ecclesial, and earthly-citizen prerogatives as available. Surely you and I would want to be treated that way if our lives had landed us in such desperate straits? That is something Jesus taught us to weigh when we consider such people.

May God fill us with love, compassion, courage, and patience as we attempt to live Christ's teachings even when they are difficult, inconvenient, or politically unpopular.

Zach Spidel *is pastor of East Dayton Fellowship, Dayton, OH.*

Oriented Toward Justice

By Joshua Nolt

OUR WORK WITH refugees began with our value of being "justice-oriented," which is grounded in two Hebrew words ṣᵊḏāqâ and mišpāṭ. The first Hebrew word describes justice in relational terms—being in right relationship with one another. The second is more structural in nature, describing just systems.

Our work is also shaped by our ecclesiology of what it means to be God's people. God's initial call to Abraham was "to the land that I will show you" (Gen. 12:1), a calling to leave the security of what was known as an act of faith and trust in God's call. God's deliverance of the people of Abraham, Issac, and Jacob from Egypt led Moses to remind them of this wandering identity when he gave this instruction: "Do not mistreat or oppress a foreigner, for you were foreigners in Egypt" (Ex. 22:21). Moses builds on these words in Leviticus saying, "The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the Lord your God" (Lev. 19:34). The very presence of God that journeyed with the people of God dwelled in the mobile tabernacle. Jesus, in solidarity with God's historic people describes his itinerant life saying, "the Son of Man has no place to lay his head." And in Hebrews, the writer gives this description of God's faithful: "They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own... a better country—a heavenly one" (Heb. 11:13-16).

The biblical precedent for the church to understand itself through the lens of the refugee, the migrant, the immigrant, and as a displaced people is a strong one. Identification as one of these people, and solidarity with these groups of people, are part of being God's people in this broken, oppressive, and violent world.

A story. . .

I met Pastor Joseph for breakfast one Saturday morning. Joseph moved to the US from Kenya in order to attend seminary (that story in and of itself tells of the providential hand of God). He currently pastors a small church of African refugees that meets in the building of Lancaster Brethren in Christ (we actually have two other congregations using our building as their "church"). He wanted me to meet Pastor J., a refugee from the Congo who recently arrived in the US. Here's a bit of his story...

Pastor J. fled the violence of Congo with his family and ended up in a refugee camp in Zimbabwe for fourteen years. Fourteen years. This would be where his childrent would grow up. The camp held Tens of thousands of refugees, in a few hectares (one hectare equals 2.471 acres). At no time in those fourteen years were Pastor J. and his family allowed to leave the refugee camp. If they did so, they would lose their refugee status.

Here's some perspective: I drove farther

that morning to the breakfast to meet Pastor J. than he was allowed to travel in fourteen years.

The fourteen years spent in the refugee camps were fourteen years of uncertainty. There were numbers of possibilities of Western countries in which they would find refuge: Australia, Canada, the US, but they had no idea which one it might be, nor did they know when it would be.

That morning, as I sat with Pastor Joseph and Pastor J., I remembered other words of Hebrews: "Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering" (Heb. 13:3). Christian solidarity means living my life informed by the lives of others, particularly the oppressed and vulnerable and suffering.

Our value of being justice-oriented has led our congregation to invest heavily in refugee resettlement, and by invest I'm referring to both financial and human resources. We've dedicated our parsonage as a home to welcome refugees, and in 2023 we were invited to purchase a neighboring blighted home to be used for the same purpose (this story is another story of God's leading and provision).

We currently have two welcome teams serving two families through Church World Service, our local resettlement agency. These teams come alongside each family to relieve the overwhelming nature of coming to a new country and a new culture to begin a new life. Imagine having to do that on your own —how overwhelming, isolating, and stressful it would be—on top of the trauma of having to leave your home country and the circumstances that caused having to leave in the first place, on top of the trauma of having to move from place to place. These Welcome Teams not only meet the tangible and logistical needs of refugee families, but the intangibles as well. They become friends, those who share empathy and concern and love.

What binds Welcome Teams and families together is not language or culture. It's the familiarity they discover in their shared humanity. Their lives are further enriched as they learn and experience each other's differences, particularly the food!

This article and our church's work comes about during a time in our nation when refugees, migrants, and immigrants are living in increased fear because of public policy. We did not set about this work to be contrarian. It was not in reaction to governmental policy but response to Christ and what it means to be the people of Christ. Many of these who suffer are fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. All of them, according to the scriptures, are to be treated by the church as native born. The government will do what the government does, but how the church serves these groups and how they speak of these groups bears witness not only to who we are as God's people in the world, but also bears witness to the world of who God is.

Joshua Nolt *is senior pastor of the Lancaster (PA) Brethren in Christ Church.*

Citizenship: Pathway or Obstacle Course

By Lois Saylor with Andrea Saylor

A FEW YEARS ago, I read what felt like an off-hand comment on Facebook. The person was questioning those who would benefit from DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals). This executive order allowed minors brought to the US to have a limited lawful status. They could stay and work without fear of deportation. The comment referenced the DACA children, now adults, and said contemptuously, "If they wanted to be citizens, they would be by now." The implication was that they really didn't want to be citizens or didn't want citizenship enough to go through the process. Because my daughter is an immigration attorney, I knew that it wasn't that simple. The truth is and remains that DACA recipients don't have a pathway to citizenship. It's like the old saying, "You can't get there from here."

For this article I interviewed my daughter to try once again to understand the complexity of immigrants gaining legal status and citizenship. And while this article cannot cover all the ins and outs and the exceptions popping up here and there, I hope readers will have some understanding of the process, the variables, and how difficult and prolonged this process can be. For a fortunate few there is a straightforward pathway to citizenship, but for most I think it looks more like an obstacle course.

Entering the country legally is a first key step to citizenship and there are two basic categories: family and employment cases. A family member can apply for permanent resident status (a green card) for a spouse or child. An employer can petition to get a working visa for a potential employee. Under a humanitarian category, unlawful entry can be forgiven. In these cases, there are various protections for those who would experience persecution (severe harm) if they return to their home country. Both refugees and asylum seekers can apply for permanent residency and citizenship, but it is not automatic. Other humanitarian cases include the following, but circumstances vary as to a pathway to permanent residency or citizenship.

- DACA recipients (see fuller explanation below under terms);
- Victims of human trafficking;
- Those with Temporary Protected Status (when the US proclaims the home country unsafe for return. This does not lead to permanent residency or citizenship);
- Non-citizens petitioning for legal status for themselves (as opposed to a family member as stated above) if they are victims of abuse by a US citizen or lawful permanent resident spouse, parent, or stepparent;
- Undocumented persons cooperating with law enforcement as a victim of crime.

While systems are in place for some of these cases to apply for permanent status or citizenship, there are requirements that can be cumbersome, expensive, and take long

years, literally decades, to navigate. First there are the legal or technical requirements that must be met and these often require a lawyer to explain the systems, fill out applications, appear in court, and help with various documents their client may not be able to access easily or at all. Second there are systemic blocks such as the huge backlog of cases that the immigration courts or USCIS (US Citizenship and Immigration Services) must handle. These backlogs can add years to the process. Third, there are the personal handicaps to overcome such as language, cultural understandings, and appropriate testimonies.

All of these areas can cause confusion or miscommunication with the court system, resulting in delays and denials that have to be appealed. Often the courts are looking for precise and legal explanations that are foreign to the person with very different cultural experiences and understandings. Immigration attorneys help their clients maneuver through all these obstacles. Moreover, we must stop here to note that humanitarian cases are usually brought by people who have already experienced trauma. Pursuing legal status can unfortunately be re-traumatizing as they restate and retell their trauma.

Immigration, legal status, permanent residency, and citizenship are not easy. They are fraught with personal hardship and losses, with legal bureaucracy, systemic complications, and associated costs in application fees and other costs. I answered that Facebook comment saying, "That's the problem, there is no pathway to citizenship." I think I am still trying to answer that uninformed comment, still trying to understand it for myself. But what I can understand is people wanting to live in peace, to work with opportunity, to make a home for family, and to build a secure life. What I admire is people fighting long and difficult battles to have what I enjoy as a birthright. I was simply born into a country many others would like to call home too, people who will make good neighbors.

Lois Saylor *is an editorial advisor for* Shalom! *and a member of the Harrisburg (PA) Brethren in Christ Church.* ***Andrea Saylor*** *is an immigration attorney in Philadelphia, PA with the law firm of Palladino, Isbell & Casazza. She lives in west Philadelphia and enjoys her diverse neighborhood, traveling, and being with friends.*

Terms Briefly Defined

Legal status: in the US under lawful conditions, including specific visas for employment or education.
Undocumented: no legal status.
DACA: protection from deportation and the right to work for those who came to the US and resided here continuously before age of sixteen; entered the U.S. before June 15, 2007 and were born on or after June 16, 1981.
Permanent residency: legal status to live in the US with a green card but maintaining the citizenship of the home country and without the full rights of citizens such as voting or obtaining a US passport.
Citizenship: full legal status and rights.

Editor's Notes

2025 subscription renewals:

Subscription renewals were waived for 2024, because of a strong balance in the *Shalom!* account. However, in 2025, you can expect to receive a renewal letter soon. The cost remains the same ($20/year), with additional contributions welcomed and encouraged. You can renew online at *bicus.org/resources/publications/shalom/* or send a check payable to Brethren in Christ U.S. to the editor (address on page 2). Thank you!

Upcoming topics:

1. *Anabaptism at 500:* In 2025, Anabaptists are celebrating the 500th anniversary of their beginnings in Europe. What can we, as spiritual descendants of those early Anabaptists, learn from their legacy?
- Historical roots of the Brethren in Christ in Anabaptism (original stream)
- How Anabaptism meshes with subsequent theological streams (Pietism, Wesleyanism, and Evangelicalism)
- "Recovering our Anabaptist roots": what would that look like?

2. *Living simply*: Our doctrinal statements over the years have moved from clear instructions about separation from the world to much less specificity. This core value is the only one that is "instrumental"—that is, it's a means towards an end. We value uncluttered lives *so that* we are free to love, give, serve.
- What does it look like to "unclutter" so we can love, give, serve?
- How does clutter get in the way? Is clutter the same for everyone?
- Testimonies, stories

3. *Communication:* New and old ways to communicate our message; relative effectiveness of various methods (written, oral, social media, video, podcasts, etc.)

Contact the editor at bickhouse@aol.com if you're interested in writing.

continued from page 12

second readings, we've been bombarded with the language of "mass deportation," with all of its potentially ugly and cruel manifestations. *Solito* doesn't answer all of the legitimate questions about how to address the root causes of illegal migration or how to create orderly and humane systems and processes for legal migration. What it does do is put a very human face—that of a young child desperate to reunite with his parents and dependent on the kindness of strangers—on the immigration issue. It's not an easy book to read, but it's an important one that I highly recommend.

Harriet Sider Bicksler *is editor of* Shalom! *and a long-time member of the Grantham Brethren in Christ Church, Mechanicsburg, PA.*

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BOOK REVIEW: *Solito: A Memoir*

By Harriet Sider Bicksler

MORE THAN TWENTY-FIVE years ago in the spring of 1999, nine-year-old Javier Zamora left his home in El Salvador with five strangers and a coyote (smuggler) to come to the Unites States to join his parents, already here illegally. Even though the story takes place in 1999, way back during the Clinton administration, much of it reads as though it could be happening now.

As I read the book, *Solito*, Javier's memoir, I couldn't help imagining myself or one of my young grandchildren in the shoes of a nine-year-old child thrust among strangers to make a long, arduous, and often dangerous journey to find his parents. For many years, Zamora kept most of the trauma of his journey hidden inside, and it was only after he had gone through therapy as an adult to process the trauma that he was able to write this book. He had to be willing to put himself back into the shoes of his nine-year-old self .

The story starts in La Herradura, a small village near the coast of El Salvador. Javier's grandparents, with whom he lived, try a couple times to secure a visa for him to be able to come to the US legally, but the visa is denied. So they and his parents make arrangements with a coyote, and Javier joins three men and a woman and her ten-year-old daughter for the journey ("The Six"). They set off across El Salvador and Guatemala by bus, then cross a part of the Pacific Ocean between Guatemala and Mexico on a boat at night (a harrowing experience, to say the least), and proceed by bus, van, and on foot up the coast of Mexico and across the Sonora to Nojales, Arizona—a journey of almost three thousand miles takes about two months. They sometimes have to stay cooped up inside for days and weeks at a time, waiting for clearance to take the next step. The foods are different (who knew there were so many kinds of tortillas?), and the Spanish is also different from country to country. Using it wrongly can identify them instantly as "migrantes" and put them in jeopardy of being arrested.

The last part of the journey is walking across the desert, at night when it's cold but also during the day when the desert sun is blazing down on them and there are only cacti for shade. They have to be alert for border patrol ("La Migra") and ready either to run or hide. On their first attempt to cross into the US, they are caught and detained for two days in what Javier calls a cage. By this time, one of The Six has gone off on his own and another gets separated from them (and likely dies), so it's just four—two adults and two children—who pose as a Mexican family. This ploy ends up serving them well.

When they are released from detention (together as a "family," thankfully), they are driven back across the border into Mexico and let go. They wait several more days until they are able to arrange another crossing with another set of coyotes. This time they almost make it but are caught by a white man who calls border patrol. The agent is a Mexican-American who speaks poor Spanish. He eventually lets them go and tells them to wait a few days before they try again. The third attempt is successful, led by yet another set of coyotes, and Javier is finally reunited with his parents in Tucson, Arizona. That's where the story ends.

Over the subsequent years, Javier learned English, attended school and college, and became a writer, publishing a book of poetry, *Unaccompanied*, in 2017. He was granted Temporary Protected Status, and then qualified for an EB-1 visa for "exceptionally bright" immigrants. In 2018, he was granted a green card for permanent residency for which he had to travel back to El Salvador to finalize. In 2023, he became a US citizen and currently lives in Tucson with his family.

I first read *Solito* in March 2024 for book club, and then I reread it in January 2025 so I could facilitate discussion of it in my other book club at church. Between my first and

continued on page 11