

Global Migration and the Quest for Justice¹

“Ways must be found to share more equitably the resources of the world.” – Social Principles, Par. 163E, The United Methodist Church

The United Methodist Church has frequently addressed general and specific topics related to migration. The Social Principles affirm:

1. “We commit ourselves as a Church to the achievement of a world community that is a fellowship of persons who honestly love one another. We pledge ourselves to seek the meaning of the gospel in all issues that divide people and threaten the growth of world community.” (64)
2. “In order to provide basic needs such as food, clothing, shelter, education, health care and other necessities, ways must be found to share more equitably the resources of the world.” (58).
3. “We advocate for the rights of all migrants and applaud their efforts toward responsibility self-organization and self-determination.” (163F)

Human migration is as old as human history. Individuals, families, tribes, and nations have been on move since the days of Abraham and Sarah and before. Throughout the centuries, political and economic factors, including wars; health and environmental challenges; and racism, xenophobia, and religious discrimination have at times uprooted people and at others lured them to new venues across continents and oceans as well as national and ethnic boundaries.

Today, migration is at once a critical international issue and a necessary option for millions of human beings. Some people seek to move; others have no alternatives. Contemporary migration involves the linked realities of abundance and poverty and racial/ethnic/religious identities and exclusion. The current global economic system reflects an expectation many people will live in poverty, or have their nations torn by conflict, so that others may live in abundance. That many people will resist poverty and war through migration is an ancient and modern fact of human existence. As a consequence, elaborate national and international systems of containment and classification based on national origin have been developed over the past quarter-century with regard to migrants.

Global migration as a factor in the quest for justice is of major concern to The United Methodist Church as a denomination that is global in its vision, mission, and ministries.

I. Contemporary Migrants

Four categories of contemporary migrants can be delineated:

- Refugees—persons outside of their country of origin who are unable or unwilling to return for fear of persecution based on race, religion, ethnicity, political affiliation or opinion; official “refugees” are so recognized by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, which is charged by the international community to oversee service to, and protection of, refugees.
- Asylum seekers—a type of refugee, persons who have left their homeland to petition for refuge in the country to which they have fled; asylum seekers must be so recognized by the countries whose protection they seek.

In 2007, recognized refugees and asylum seekers totaled 13.9 million.

- Internally displaced persons—those who are displaced within their own country because of military, economic, and social upheaval, and natural disasters such as famine, earthquake and flood; they are generally not protected by the international community, but must depend primarily for protection and assistance primarily on their country of residence, which may be implicit in the cause of displacement. In 2007, such persons numbered 24.5 million.

¹ *The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church*: 2008. Resolution 6028, pp. 754-63

- Economic migrants—are people who move from one country to another to find work. Most frequently they seek to flee from poverty to economic opportunity, and often permanently relocated so they may feed their families. Some are allowed into more affluent nations as immigrants; some enter without documentation and may be welcomed in times of labor shortages and deported in times of economic downturn or public disapproval. Such migrants are among the most vulnerable in any society; many are women and children who become the objects of abuse and brutality. One subcategory in this classification consists of migrant workers, people who move from place to place, often with the agricultural cycle, to find employment. Some return on periodic or eventual permanent basis to their homelands; others make domestic and other ties in places of employment and wish to remain. The number of current economic migrants is difficult to calculate. Some estimates run as high as 100 million globally, with large numbers in the affluent regions of North America and Europe.

II. A Context of Migration

Virtually all groups of today's migrants and refugees are battered by the divide between the rich and the poor, a divide rooted in nineteenth and twentieth century colonialism and directly caused by rapid corporate globalization in agriculture, industry, and commerce. Currently, slightly more than 10% of the world's population consumes 85% of the world's wealth while the rest make do with just 15% of that wealth. For example, agricultural subsidization in Europe and the United States results in the dumping of commodities in the poor countries of the global South, resulting in the disruption of family farming and unemployment. Trade policies and arms deals further enrich the rich and undercut economies in the global South without providing new contexts for prosperity or hope. These realities, along with armed conflict, environmental spoilage and natural disasters force people to find new homes within their own countries or across national borders. Every region of the world is affected in some way by the global economic divide.

Yet, while money and products easily flow across borders, the movement of people is increasingly restricted, leading to concentrations of the poor along borders and, often, to the building of literal and figurative walls of exclusion, notably around the rich nations of the northern hemisphere and the affluent enclaves in Asia, Latin America, Africa, the Middle East and the Pacific. While the legal and physical walls seek to exclude flows of undocumented migrants, in fact, there is growing demand in wealthier nations for cheap labor. Millions of migrants do enter—through formal guest worker programs or through informal business networks that actively seek undocumented workers while maintaining them in an exploitative non-citizen underclass. Many of those who are shut out or who migrate without legal status are at the bottom of racial, ethnic and caste hierarchies. They are often poor women and children. On either side of the divide, families are relegated to intense human suffering, inadequate nutrition and health service, lack of educational opportunities, and the reverberating, debilitating experience of oppression. Ironically, and horribly, with regard to economic migrants, the rich say, "Come in, do our dirty work at low wages, and then go away." Significant percentages of the work force are migrants in affluent countries, with the figure exceeding more than 50 percent in parts of the Middle East. Such "guest workers" enjoy limited civil and human rights.

The global South is particularly concerned with the migration of people from rural to urban areas and with the loss of young generations to other countries, the departures dictated either by economic need or wooing by affluent societies seeking to fill jobs with cheap labor. Such émigrés often do not want to leave; they may feel pressured by promises of education, jobs, and economic security for themselves and their families. They become entrapped in unjust global systems that drain the resources of poor, southern countries for the benefit of the affluent societies of the global North.

III. Biblical Perspectives: Justice and Shared Resources

Attitudes toward and treatment of migrants are usually conditioned today, even within the church, by nation-state considerations expressed in the language of "us" and "them"—or "we" the homefolks and "they" the intruder/alien. A beneficent attitude sometimes prevails: "'We'" will allow X number of 'them' to come among 'us' provided they acknowledge our generosity and become like us; so long, of course, as they do not threaten our comfort."

There are more biblically and theologically sound perspectives. In the biblical understanding, it is not about us and them, but about one people of God, called to seek justice and share equitably, at the very core of our spiritual and physical survival.

The Prophet Isaiah put the matter in context and posed the daunting question: “You serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. . . Such fasting that you do today will not make your voice heard on high. Is not the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house. . .” (Isaiah 58: 3-7) Not only does God’s understanding of faithfulness entail the achievement of justice, but for the comfortable, the promise of healing and salvation depends on that action. It was only when the people turned from false religiosity to operative justice that they would receive the promise of spiritual wholeness. “Then, the Lord will guide you continually and satisfy your needs in parched places. . . you shall be like a watered garden. . . whose waters never fail.” (Isaiah 58:10-11).

The Hebrew Scriptures contains many references to “strangers” and “sojourners” among the people of Israel and to provisions for treatment that reflect a tribal framework that had stipulated rules for hospitality and also limits on the outsiders. However, the Books of the Law, and to an even greater extent in the prophetic literature, concern for the stranger focuses on justice and the sharing of resources that flow from the bounty of God. Ezekiel anticipated a time when foreigners would share with the ancient Jewish nation all the blessings of the land, which was understood to belong to God alone (Leviticus 25:23). In a real sense, the ancient scriptures understand both the people of Israel and sojourners to be aliens since the people of Israel had been sojourners in Egypt. God’s providence for Israel extends to others (Psalm 146:9; Malachi 2:5), and everything, and everyone, belongs to God (Psalm 24:1-2)

The breadth of God’s love permeates the New Testament; that love incorporates faith community and goes beyond it. This is clearly emphasized in a short passage in I Thessalonians (3:12), where St. Paul prays that God will provide the grace for Christians to “abound in love for one another, and for all (people).”

Christians do not approach the issue of migration from the perspective of tribe or nation, but from within a faith community of love and welcome, a community that teaches and expects hospitality to the poor, the homeless, and the oppressed. The Christian community not only welcomes and embraces migrants but can be led by them toward clearer understandings of justice and hospitality. Furthermore, many migrants in many parts of the world today are themselves members of the Christian community, brothers and sisters of the same baptism, gathered around the same sacramental table. And people beyond the Christian community deserve no less hospitality than Christians extend to themselves.

United Methodists should harbor no doubt about their responsibility to all those who live here on the earth, especially the poor, the homeless, and the mistreated. John Wesley’s concern for the poor and outcast was constant and extended far beyond acts of charity. He worked for just systems in which persons could with dignity stand on their own feet. Wesley advocated just relationships within the social order. When some have great abundance while others are homeless and hungry, the biblical task is not merely to help those in need, but to seek justice—to shift resources and opportunity so that all are at the table, all are fed, all experience the abundance of God’s love both physically and spiritually.

IV. Critical Issues Relating to Migration Today

United Methodists and all Christians face numerous critical situations, causes, and effects relating to migration today, especially in regard to war and economic systems and policies that perpetuate poverty. As a global, denomination, The United Methodist Church experiences the dilemmas of nations that both “send” and “receive” migrants. Citizens and undocumented immigrants are within the church’s membership, as are employers and migrant workers, police and detainees, and affluent and poor families. The United Methodist family is a microcosm of migrant issues, a church that through God’s grace seeks to respond to the needs of the most physically vulnerable and also address the spiritual needs of the privileged.

The following are among the critical issues demanding attention:

1. The volume of refugees, asylum seekers, and persons displaced within their own countries is growing, as are the numbers of economic migrants with and without documentation.
2. Wealthy nations, especially those with decreasing populations, are increasingly dependent upon migrants to maintain their current economies. They seek both high skilled professionals and low wage workers for jobs in construction, health care, agriculture, meat packing, and domestic service. The "receiving" nations or areas on a world scale include Australia, Canada, Europe, Japan, New Zealand, the United States and some countries of the Middle East (such as Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Lebanon). Regional migration, often in the form of contract labor, is common in Brazil, Hong Kong, Lebanon, South Africa, and South Korea and other nations.
3. The critical loss of skilled workers and potential leaders in "sending" countries undermines the future economic and social advancement of those societies. Doctors from poorer nations can often earn more in the U.S. as a nurse than as a physician in their country of origin. The "brain drain," often deliberately encouraged by rich countries for their own benefit, affects teachers, engineers, medical personnel, researchers, and technicians.
4. Old wars and territorial occupations have left a critical migration crisis and new wars add to the problem. This can be illustrated in the Middle East where many Palestinians remain as refugees more than a half century since they lost their homes in Israel. In recent years, millions of Iraqis have fled their country, adding to displaced population of the greater Middle East.
5. The passage of stricter enforcement of anti-immigrant legislation and the building of exclusionary walls, often in response to increased migration, intensifies cultural tensions, marked by racial, class, and religious "backlash." Restrictive policies also intensify migrant resistance based on fear of arrest and deportation, substandard wages, physical and mental abuse, and even death for crossing a border. Migrants fall prey to trafficking for economic or sexual purposes and sometimes become virtual slaves in their new place of residence.
6. The increasing percentage of migrant women, who now make up half of the international migrant population and as much as 70 to 80 percent in some countries. Many of these women are domestic workers, who may raise other peoples' children while being separated from their own. Some women and girls who migrant are subjected to physical and sexual abuse and fear reprisals if they complain.
7. Migration today divides families across generations. Filipino contract workers in Saudi Arabia may serve in those countries for their entire careers, and then watch their children step into their roles as they retire. Families are also divided by deportation of undocumented parents, while children hold citizenship.
8. Remittances (sending "home" the paycheck) have become major sources of financing for poor countries; revenues that threaten to undercut aid assistance from rich nations. The monies migrants send home is massive, an estimated \$230 billion in 2005. Some nations, including the Philippines or El Salvador, depend on remittances to support the financial system. In an effort to escape responsibility for the sharing of resources, some officials in the global North tout remittances as replacements for development aid. This attitude violates the spirit of the Millennium Development Goals and other United Nations accords. Through international instruments, northern nations have set the goal of providing 0.7% of their gross national product in development aid to poor nations, as well to cancel some debt and alter trade policies in ways that benefit poor nations.

V. Response of the Church

The United Methodist Church commits itself to:

1. Provide real help for refugees, asylees and migrants.
2. Engage in strong, coordinated advocacy on migration issues and on behalf of actions that overcome poverty, war and other causes leading to the displacement and marginalization of people.

3. Organize through institutional channels and prepare educational resources for the achievement of these objectives.

Assistance includes:

1. Relief to refugees and displaced persons around the world, including the resettlement, when possible, of refugees through congregations and through economic development programs for both those who permanently resettle and those who may return to homelands, this work to be coordinated by the United Methodist Committee on Relief in collaboration with all other levels and organizations of the church;
2. Congregational and annual conference programs that humanely respond to migrants within their borders--defending their human rights, advancing just immigration policies by national governments, and tending to their spiritual, material, and legal needs as required, with the General Boards of Global Ministries and Church and Society, in collaboration with other general agencies, responsible for resource materials to help in equipping conferences and congregations for these ministries;
3. Education of church members and communities on the causes and realities of migration, including international treaty commitments, the issues of economic and environmental justice, and the obstacles to a just, peaceable world created by anti-immigrant racism and xenophobia;
4. Building bridges between diverse races, ethnicities, religions and cultures, opposing violence against and abuse of migrants;
5. Work with civic and legal organizations to help communities to alleviate social conditions caused by harsh immigration laws and heavy-handed national security measures; and
6. Recognizing the right of sanctuary in any United Methodist local church for migrants subject to detention or deportation by government security forces.

Advocacy includes promotion of:

1. Just and equitable trade and development policies that support human rights and counteract the root causes of migration such as war and militarization, environment spoilage, and corporate greed;
2. Engagement with other Christian and religious organizations in North-South dialogues, study of international economic policies, and joint action;
3. Protection for uprooted women and children from all forms of violence and abuse, including full legal protection of children in situations of armed conflict;
4. Unification of families divided by borders and legal status wherever this occurs;
5. Denunciation of xenophobic and racist reactions against newcomers;
6. Defense of civil liberties regardless of the legal status of persons;
7. Abolishment of governmental anti-terrorism policies and practices that criminalize or profile refugees and immigrants as threats to national security; and
8. Adoption by all nations of the United Nations International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrants Workers and their Families, and mobilize to promote compliance with the terms of the convention.

Institutional Organization includes:

- Continuation of a United Methodist Task Force on Immigration to lead the church in a prophetic response to refugee and migrant issues by interpreting official policy in light of current realities, coordinating vision, analysis, education and action. Said task force will be convened by two bishops designated by the Council of Bishops, organized and staffed by the General Boards of Church and Society and Global Ministries, and composed of representatives from all appropriate general agencies

(GCORR, GBOD, GCFA and others), as well as persons from jurisdictions, central conferences, annual conferences, partner churches, denominational ethnic/racial caucuses, and ethnic and language ministry plans as situations dictate. General agencies will each bear the cost of their participation in the task force and those agencies may underwrite the costs of non-agency participation as needs require and resources permit.