



Lutherans as Immigrants

STEPHEN PAUL BOUMAN

I am Lutheran, and I am pro-immigrant. Abraham, a wandering Aramean, was my grandfather in the faith. His wife, Sarah, is my grandmother.

A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number....When the Egyptians treated us harshly...we cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors....The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand...and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. (Deut 26:5–9)

An economic migrant, a desert nomad leads his family toward a land of promise. “Now the LORD said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you’” (Gen 12:1). And so begins the great trek for new life, survival, redemption. Abraham will also find danger, enough that he plans to pass his wife off as his sister. It is a trek repeated in the heat of the Sonoran desert, in boats from Africa running ashore in southern Europe, in the hulls of boats from Fujian province to the shores of Long Island.

During his trek, Abraham finds hope, welcome, signs from God. At each place of hope and refreshment, he builds an altar and calls on the name of God. He gives these places of divine grace on his journey names like Shechem and Bethel. “Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem....Then the LORD appeared to Abram, and said, ‘To your offspring I will give this land.’ So he built there an altar to the LORD” (Gen 12:6–7).

Experiencing the church today is to experience the church of our forebears. They were immigrants, and so are the newcomers among us. We are all called together at the table of the Lord.

“Shechem” and “Bethel” today look like a cot in the undercroft at Gloria Dei Lutheran Church on Long Island, giving shelter to migrant workers in winter; they look like Lutheran congregations along La Frontera in Texas, reaching out to migrant workers on both sides of the border; they look like the *Amigos en Pie* immigrant ministry of Trinity Lutheran Church in Manhattan, immigrants helping immigrants. Bethel looks like those organized in Amagansett on the east end of Long Island, listening to the stories of economic migrants rousted out of their homes in the middle of the night. Shechem looks like Lutheran congregations in Brooklyn and Los Angeles involved in the sanctuary movement and offering hospitality and safety to vulnerable families. It looks like the hundreds of new immigrant ministries of the ELCA. Bethel, Shechem, a trail of altars. A wandering Aramean is our grandfather in the faith. We are Lutheran, and we are pro-immigrant.

My grandfather was a wandering Aramean. “I found us,” said our daughter Rachel after a visit to Ellis Island and reading our family name on the museum’s wall. We find “us,” as we read of Abraham’s migration, the beginning of our family journey. The altars at which we all worship on the Lord’s Day are our Shechem and Bethel, places of refreshment and hope. We find “us” in each of our new neighbors. “The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt” (Lev 19:34).

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The issues are complex. All agree that our immigration system in America is broken. But Lutherans have a two-handed God. In the kingdom of the left hand, there are many proposals for comprehensive immigration reform, and we struggle with others of good will, recognizing in humility that we could be wrong about this or that approach, that what we actually can achieve may fall short of the best possible outcome. In the kingdom of the left hand—God’s work in the secular world—as we look at comprehensive immigration reform, we enter the fray with a few guiding principles, about which we may agree or disagree.

Not so, in the kingdom of the right—God’s work through the gospel. Red- and blue-state people sit together in our pews and hear the God of the Bible call us to welcome the stranger and care for the neighbor, without equivocation or apology. Compassion, solidarity, and generosity of spirit come naturally to grandchildren of a wandering Aramean. You cannot love God and not love those God embraces. The one who washes our windows, drives the taxi, cares for many of our children, cuts the lawn, and washes the dishes—including many new immigrant Lutherans—is a wandering Aramean.

FOUR SPIRITUAL VALUES

Over the years, as the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS) has evaluated the various proposals for reform of the immigration system, it has settled on four criteria to weigh whether the reform proposal looks promising or not. They reflect four spiritual, biblical values.*

1. Does the proposal promote family unity?

From Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids in Postville, Iowa, and across the country, to the backlog of family visas where families wait up to fifteen years to be legally reunited, families are being burst apart in our broken system.

Family Values in the Bible

Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God. (Luke 2:25–28 NIV)

Focus on the hands of an old man, the hands of a grandpa, and think about the hands of a mother. Father David Garcia is the pastor of San Fernando Cathedral in San Antonio, Texas. He described how his Mexican American community celebrates the Festival of the Presentation. The key is the hands of the mother, *La Virgen de la Candelaria*, “the Lady of the Candles.” In one hand, she holds a lighted candle, in the other, the Christ child. Themes of Epiphany light and the presentation of Jesus in the temple come together.

At the Presentation Candelaria Mass, the priest blesses three things that are brought to church from home by the people. First, he blesses the candles that will be used at the home altars for family devotions. This is really a blessing of the kitchen tables of each family of the parish. The altar is a table to unite the tables and the families. Our eating and drinking at each table is a united, holy thing. So, he blesses the candles. Then he blesses the *niños*, which are the Christchild figures from the crèche scenes. Then the priest blesses the flesh-and-blood infants and children. The connections between the altar table and the kitchen table, between the Christchild and all children, between the church, the home, and the world are beautifully woven into the celebration of the Presentation. Here is the richness of parish and family life.

The Presentation flows from the incarnation of Jesus, the Word taking flesh in the world, in a family. Consider all the incredible richness of parish and family life that is brought together in the presentation story from the Gospel of Luke. In

*This section uses, with permission, material from the recent book on immigration by me and Ralston Defenbaugh (LIRS director): *They Are Us: Lutherans and Immigration* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2009).

the presence of Jesus and his parents—and his growing extended family in the temple—we call for immigration reform that protects precious families and keeps them together.

2. Does the proposal promote human rights and worker rights?

Migrant workers come to the United States so they can work, but too often they also experience lower wages, exploitative labor practices, dangerous working conditions, and constant fear and insecurity. Providing legal documents for honest, hardworking migrants would discourage such abuses of human rights and worker rights.

Human and Worker Rights in the Bible

One day, after Moses had grown up, he went out to his people and saw their forced labor. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his kinsfolk. He looked this way and that, and seeing no one he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand. (Exod 2:11–12)

The children of Israel were slaves. They could not quit their work. They were exploited and abused, like *los muditos* of Jackson Heights, Queens, deaf-mutes who were forced to sell trinkets on subways and beaten if they did not make their quota or tried to escape. Their undocumented status made them vulnerable to exploitation. They stayed in virtual slavery because they had no legal status and could easily be jailed and deported back to the hunger and poverty from which they came. We have met Fujianese workers held in slavery until they paid off their debts for transportation from China to America. Asian and Eastern European young women are part of the global sex trafficking that renders them slaves. Philippine and African domestic workers have been held as slaves for years in the homes of wealthy folks from their same country living in America. Where there is no legal document, there are broken families, indentured workers without rights or recourse, and there is abuse.

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Moses came upon the abuse of one of his fellow Hebrews. The word “Hebrew,” according to some scholars (though this remains debated), derives from the ancient Near Eastern term “Habiru,” which refers variously to wandering nomads or even outlaws. The text says that Moses “looked this way and that,” and, when he saw no one, he killed the Egyptian persecutor. When I first encountered this story in Sunday School, I was taught that, after looking around, Moses saw that the coast was clear. Rabbi Hillel, a contemporary of Jesus, had a different interpretation. Hillel says that Moses was looking for help, and that the rest of the Exodus narrative was about Moses never again being in the position where “he looked this way and

that,” and there was no help. The Exodus narrative was about the creation of community, a solidarity based on justice, grounded in the compassion of God. They left Egypt a motley crew. They entered the promised land a people, bound together in Yahweh, the God of the widows and orphans and the oppressed, the God of the strangers among us (see Deut 10:17–19).

Our immigration situation today calls for such solidarity on behalf of the stranger, especially when our new neighbors are abused or denied their basic rights, when their families are torn apart and their lives lived in virtual slavery. When we look this way and that, will we find one another in the solidarity of Jesus?

3. Does the proposal enable those without status to come out of the shadows and live without fear?

The vast majority of the twelve million undocumented people living in the United States is comprised of otherwise law-abiding, honest, hardworking people who want to provide for themselves and their families. Newcomers without legal immigration documents are among the most vulnerable for whom we are called to care. By bringing people out of the shadows of fear and marginalization, we allow our immigrant communities to live in the light of liberty, contributing more freely to our culture and economy.

Those without Status and the Bible

Christ has “broken down the dividing wall” (Eph 2:14); in Christ, we all have equal status as children beloved of God. Paul’s appeal to Philemon is instructive about the nature of the church and its relation to those without status, living in fear (that is, about those who are welcome at the church’s table). While imprisoned in Rome, Paul, “a prisoner of Christ Jesus,” writes to Philemon and to “the church in your house” (Phlm 1, 3, 9) about Philemon’s slave, Onesimus.

I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me. I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you....Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother—especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. (Phlm 1:10–16)

This little book gives us a fresh look at Paul the Apostle on the run, constructing a mission theology in the midst of the action; this theology is sometimes messy, sometimes with many loose ends. See how Paul improvises on the authority of the gospel and his own authority as a servant of the gospel to affirm their partnership; to nurture the faith, companionship, and giftedness around the church’s table; and to extend that table toward the world, in this case, a fugitive slave. It is what every congregation and missional leader is called to do every day.

Paul centers the partnership, and his particular ministry of bringing Onesimus out of the shadows and back into community, by naming the source of that

mission: “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (Phlm 1:3).

Like the best preachers, who claim a pulpit for God, Paul claims the public reading of his letter in the liturgy for God. There is business to discuss, and it is public business. That is the bold stance of the church’s advocacy for immigrants without status, for those living in the shadows. Paul is appealing for Philemon to place a seat at the table for Onesimus, the slave who has left Philemon’s house. Paul calls this slave his own son, just as Jesus called the outcast woman with the twelve-year hemorrhage “daughter.” Today, what would it mean to hear “illegal aliens” called sisters and brothers?

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Christian congregations and leaders see transformed relationships and name them. Onesimus was a slave, but now he has a seat at the table as a brother. Paul is teaching table manners. Philemon is called to treat Onesimus as a partner in the work of the gospel. He must see Onesimus with new eyes, no longer a slave but a beloved brother. They are now kin, tablemates.

So must we respond in our own time, with a hospitality that transcends the labels that divide, that create suspicion and fear, that strip away the dignity that all deserve as children of the God who calls people out of darkness into light.

4. Does the proposal provide for a path to permanence, so the immigrant can become a full member of society?

Throughout its history, a great strength of the United States has been its welcome to immigrants, manifested by the desire and expectation that immigrants will become citizens, fully participating members of civic society. This tradition has meant that the United States has avoided having a permanent underclass of people of foreign origin who do not share the same rights and who, thus, are more subject to discrimination and exploitation.

A Path to Permanence and Full Inclusion in Society and the Bible

To be included, to have a permanent place at the communal table, is the dream of all immigrants, a dream that often goes unrealized. The biblical story of Ezra opening the book of the law of Moses and blessing the Lord before the Water Gate in Jerusalem’s walls is a beautiful narrative of what it looks like when a people comes home (Neh 8:1–10). The path to permanence is through the believer’s heart. Israel had been in captivity and exile, and those who remained in the ravaged land had been living in the shadows. Their lives had been at risk; they were not at home in captivity in Babylon; they grieved and found it difficult to worship, for “How could we sing the LORD’s song in a foreign land?” (Ps 137:4). In their transient life of immigrant exiles, Jeremiah had called them to pray: “Seek the welfare of the city

where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare" (Jer 29:7). The vast majority of immigrants, documented and undocumented, seek the welfare of their new land, trusting that in its welfare they will find their welfare.

The Hebrews would know that they were home when they could gather and worship the living God in their own language. "For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you will call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you" (Jer 29:11–12).

In the story from the book of Nehemiah, that promise was being fulfilled. They had rebuilt the walls of their shattered city. They had gathered at the Water Gate. In this great assembly, they heard the word of the Lord spoken in their own language. They wept for joy. A part of their worship was to welcome the stranger and welcome the poor by "send[ing] portions to those for whom nothing [had been] prepared" (Neh 8:10). They were home. At the Water Gate, the exile path led to permanence.

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When the leaders and pastor of Salem Lutheran Church (of Danish origin —there was a Scandinavian boat suspended from the ceiling) in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, handed the keys, the checkbook, the registry of the congregation and its 103 years of pastoral acts to Pastor Khader El Yatim and the leaders of newborn Salaam Arabic Lutheran Church, a people in exile received a path to permanence and full inclusion. A Lutheran immigrant church welcomes immigrants. Salem begets Salaam—not a sullen minority being forced out of their church in a changing neighborhood, but free and faithful Lutherans from two very different cultures, sharing immigrant roots, taking the time and supreme effort to fall in love with another set of table companions in all of such love's vulnerability. Salem was the Water Gate for the people of Salaam. A path to permanence and inclusion is not just a legislative value, but a spiritual gift.

The folks at Salem said, "Take care of our heritage," and the folks at Salaam replied, "The church you cared for is in good hands." These brothers and sisters walked through the pain and exhilaration of letting go of the familiar and the comfortable and being grasped in the transforming power of the gospel. In some sense, it is a reminder that every congregation must always be accepting the invitation to the funeral of the church it remembers, even as it is called at the Water Gate to tell the old, old story and share portions with people for whom nothing has been prepared. A path to permanence, Salem says "Salaam" ("peace") to its new neighbors.

SOLIDARITY OF DREAMS

The dreams of our immigrant grandparents and our new neighbors today are the same. It is in our DNA as Christians to welcome the stranger as central to our mission. Imagine dreams of:

1. *New Roots.* We are uprooted and being planted. I met Ali, a Sudanese refugee, at a worship service for Lutheran Oromo-speaking Ethiopians in Phoenix. He spent years in a refugee camp in Djibouti, where he became a Christian.
2. *An End to the Ordeal of Passage.* Since being in Agua Prieto, Mexico, just south of the Arizona border in the Sonoran desert, I will never again look in the same way at those who pick the harvests or the day laborers who line the streets of Mamoroneck, Mount Kisco, Farmingville, or Jackson Heights in New York—scenes repeated elsewhere across our country. In a church basement in Agua Prieto, I met the people who risk their lives to cross the border, who inspire fear and hate among us, who are hunted down like animals, and who too often die in the desert. They are, for the most part, desperately poor, trying to save the lives of their children or feed their parents. They are Ruth and her mother-in-law seeking food in the land of Moab; they are Joseph’s brothers crossing the border into Egypt in search of survival in famine.
3. *Being Strangers No Longer.* As we welcome newcomers to our congregations, some of our undercrofts smell of kimchi, rice and beans, curried goat. As these smells become familiar, those who produce them cease being strangers. Now our eyes do not stare but behold. Imagine the stranger transformed as brother and sister at the passing of the peace in your congregation.
4. *Ending Past Bad Situations.* My grandfather could not feed his family as a farmer on the North Sea coast, and he could not afford to pay the taxes. Our Lutheran forebears were tenant farmers no longer needed, cannon fodder for wars they didn’t believe in. Now, at a memorial service for East Africans at Holy Trinity, Hollis, New York, people from Congo mourned the loss of hundreds of thousands of people, including their own family members.
5. *Receiving a Welcome and Experiencing Hospitality.* Imagine the relief when someone opens the door—to a home, a church, a heart.
6. *Bodily Security.* Migrant workers have been killed and have frozen to death in Suffolk County, Long Island. Migrant workers receive shelter, food, and hope at Gloria Dei Lutheran Church in Huntington Station, Long Island.
7. *Connected Lives.* When he got off the boat, my grandfather was connected to very few people. Gustavus Adolphus Church in Manhattan thrived when the pastor and church leaders met Swedish immigrants at the dock.

The church is the Bethel and Shechem where our grandparents began to live connected lives.

8. *Finding a Path through the Maze.* The church was the place where our grandparents were able to make a stand, find their first apartments and jobs, cut through red tape, get along in society. I dream of every Christian congregation being a place that helps new neighbors cut a path through the impossible thickets of life in America.
9. *Being Treated with Dignity.* If we regard those without documents as criminals, we dehumanize the stranger. Would you roust your grandmother out of bed in the middle of the night and drag her into the street in her pajamas before taking her to a detention facility? This happened recently to a fellow Lutheran on Long Island.
10. *Finding Meaning.* Economic migrants join cultural migrants in our post-modern world. In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, we have a story that can explain the world, a world hungry for a narrative. Our churches can be guides for travelers seeking meaning for their journeys and destinations. Every church is a preview of coming attractions, witness to the one who really “has the whole world in his hands.”
11. *Being Part of Mission.* Everyone has gifts to give. Everyone longs for a noble vision to direct her life. From the acolyte to the singer in the choir, all God’s children want to make a difference. “You shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in” (Isa 58:12).

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12. *Beauty.* Southwest Brooklyn was the center of Nordic Lutheranism in New York City and is in the midst of a bold mission-strategy process today. This Lutheran church accompanied the immigrants as they made a stand in the new world. Brooklyn is known as the “borough of churches,” and, as you drive along the Gowanus Expressway, the sky is pierced by their steeples erupting from the working-class streets. Immigrants wanted touches of beauty in this new land. Their world was grey and drab; they wanted more than that. The world is too full of grief not to have art, music, liturgy, space for prayer and spiritual reflection. In these houses of worship, the truth of Psalm 90 took form, and people were even able to bear death.

LORD, you have been our dwelling place in all generations...from everlasting to everlasting you are God....The days of our life are seventy years, or perhaps eighty, if we are strong; even then their span is only toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away....Turn, O LORD! How long? Have compassion on your servants! Satisfy us in the morning with

your steadfast love, so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days....Let your work be manifest to your servants, and your glorious power to their children. Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and prosper for us the work of our hands—O prosper the work of our hands!

The spiritual hunger of a people longing for and creating a home was answered by Bethel and Shechem: the spires of Brooklyn.

The church that turns its face to the other—that becomes the face of Jesus toward the poor, the stranger, all without the gospel—is always a church being renewed and reformed. The power of such renewal is the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

I am a grandson of Abraham, a wandering Aramean, a grandson of Hermann Jansen Bouman of the North Sea—both immigrants. I acknowledge my sisters and brothers of African descent whose grandparents came in forced migration via the Middle Passage. All of us in our particular histories are strangers in a strange land. We are Lutheran, and we are pro-immigrant. 

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