

**WHERE FAITH AND SOLIDARITY MEET:  
SUPPORTING MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES**



Washington DC was the venue for a Migration Learning Exchange between faith-based activists from the UK, Ireland and the USA in June 2018. Hosted by CWS (Church World Service) in the United Methodist Centre, just an exhortation away from Congress, this peer learning exchange touched on the power of the gospels in action, humanity, neighbourliness and prayer in translating values into the practice of solidarity.



*"We don't help them because they are Christian – but because we are", is the mantra of CWS – [Church World Service](#). As a cooperative ministry of 37 US Christian denominations and communications, CWS argues that the US Congress should enact immigration reform that offers a path to citizenship for all those community members that are undocumented. Practical work is described as a 'four-legged stool' – policy advocacy, grassroots organising, refugee leadership development and media outreach. As part of its advocacy CWS supports public prophetic actions, which include a Dream Sabbath (in support of the Dream Act. Rev. Reuben Eckles explains – *"Clergy wash young immigrants feet (in order to) . . .ask Congress to do as Jesus did. . .They felt so inspired in having the faith community with them"*.*



Emphasis is also placed on supporting the leadership of those people most affected by current immigration restrictions. Focusing on 7 priority states, over 600 individual activists have been trained and supported in community organising. CWS Grassroots Coordinator for Immigrants' Rights, Rev. Noel Andersen, poses the question – *"Most impacted people come from a faith tradition. . .(so) how can faith help keep the hope?"*

## HOLDING OUT THE HAND OF SANCTUARY



When Luis Lopez Acabal sought sanctuary in the University Presbyterian Church in Phoenix, Arizona, in September 2014, he was one of many people that Sanctuary Churches across the USA made welcome ([www.sanctuarynotdeportation.org](http://www.sanctuarynotdeportation.org)). **The Sanctuary Movement** asserts – *“As faith allies, we are called to be in solidarity through rapid response mobilisation to stop these raids (by ICE – Immigration & Customs Enforcement), to stay these deportations and support impacted communities. In the face of President Trump’s extremist anti-immigration agenda, we must respond with a prophetic and bold voice”*. Offering long-term sanctuary in church premises is not an easy option, but there are currently 36 sanctuary cases and 40 Sanctuary Coalitions, representing 1,100 congregations. The decision to become a sanctuary congregation demands deep conversations about how far civil disobedience is acceptable in confronting ‘unjust’ laws. In short – how can safe space become a moral platform?

## LIFTING THE VOICE OF THOSE AT RISK

Faith-based organisations, ranging from [HIAS \(Hebrew Immigration Refugee Service\)](#) to the [Lutheran Immigration Refugee Service](#), and many others speak of the importance of accepting guidance from those people most impacted by fear of

deportation. Omar Perez of [PICO](#) and Greisa Mertinez – [United We Dream](#) agree. A daughter of undocumented migrants herself, Greisa is acutely aware that – “*If you don’t tell your own story someone’s going to tell it for you*”. Stories have power said Javier Cuebas, Lutheran Immigration Refugee Service – “*The stories that are written are those that get people to take action.*” Stories can re-set the agenda for the many faith communities that PICO coordinates to maximise the “*unique muscles that faith communities have*”. There is now a vibrant network of 44 affiliated federations and 8 state-wide coalitions working in 150 cities/towns and across 17 states. More than one million families and 1,000 congregations from 40 different denominations participate through PICO, moved by the Bible and scriptures to succour the refugee and welcome the stranger. This faith-based organising model espouses values and forging relationships as the essential glue of inter-faith action.

PICO Faith in Action is building a people-powered movement.

**Matthew 2:13-15** Common English Bible (CEB)

## Escape to Egypt

<sup>13</sup>When the magi had departed, an angel from the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up. Take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod will soon search for the child in order to kill him.” <sup>14</sup>Joseph got up and, during the night, took the child and his mother to Egypt. <sup>15</sup>He stayed there until Herod died. This fulfilled what the Lord had spoken through the prophet: *I have called my son out of Egypt.*<sup>[a]</sup>

## AMPLIFYING THE VOICE OF WELCOME

Services offered by many faith groups and denominations cluster under:

- Protection: legal and physical support for refugees and people under threat of deportation and protection of human rights.
- Support in the community: including access to information, resources and accompaniment, when required, to statutory agencies.
- Inclusion: offering both social and economic opportunities to facilitate integration; and
- Long-term welcome.

Garnering public support needs issues that unite people in welcome. It is also important to hear public anxieties and to treat them seriously. The role of 'unusual allies' is important in this regard. These can be US military chaplains; they can also be the 'Bibles, Badges and Business' membership that is fostered by the [National Immigration Forum](#).



Adam Estle liaises between field mobilisers, various constituency groups and Forum staff from his base in Arizona. The Bibles, Badges and Business network has been active since 2013 identifying those 'unusual allies' – conservative religious pastors, law enforcement, business interests and US veterans – marrying compassion with common sense. Adam's approach is pragmatic. Rooted in the evangelical American South he quotes the bible, arguing – *"I am trying to take my faith in Jesus very seriously. . . I can't escape the admonition that I'm called on to love"*. Adam believes that service to the most marginalised helps people to find Jesus ([www.pray4reform.org](http://www.pray4reform.org)). Resources are developed for Pastors and Ministers ([www.welcomingthestranger.com](http://www.welcomingthestranger.com)) and digital tools, drawing on the bible, for Christian women. Adam suggests that *"Any common space is a good place to bring people together"*, but again, the emphasis on taking the time to build relationships rather than always challenging people. BBB offers bi-weekly briefings and provides training, support and peer reflection for its networks.



Both [CLINIC](#) (Catholic Legal Immigration Network) and the [US Conference of Catholic Bishops](#) are also active in offering a range of programmes to refugees and migrants. These include 'Know Your Rights' information and toolkits. The mission set by CLINIC is - *'embracing the Gospel value of welcoming the stranger'*. It realises this by promoting the dignity and protection of the rights of immigrants through a dedicated network of Catholic and community legal immigration partners – delivered through 400 offices across 47 states. Advocacy work includes an Immigration Appeals Pro Bono project, offering representation to people that are held in detention, support that enhances their chances of receiving favourable legal redress. USCCB migration outreach focuses on unaccompanied children, resettlement of refugees and administering a National Catholic Fund for Migrant & Refugee Services. Resource materials include a Quiz – 'How Welcoming is Your Community?'



## MAKING IT LOCAL

The importance of amplifying the voice of people in local communities is highlighted by how people in Lancaster, Pennsylvania dealt with a Ku Klux Klan (KKK) demonstration against migrants. Lancaster is known as a town that accepts 20 times more refugees per capita as compared to other US towns. Its open arms welcome dates back to re-settlement of refugees from Vietnam in the 1970's, but it is also an area with a high Amish population. Local hairdressers sport signs in the window – *No matter how you wear your hair, you're welcome here* - featuring an Amish bonnet, a Muslim headscarf and a ponytail. When the KKK came calling, local people organised a counter-demonstration outside of the CWS sponsored **Refugee Resettlement Initiative** to say - 'not in our name'. Support was also on tap from the Lancaster

Chamber of Commerce who praise the re-settlement of refugees as enhancing economic prosperity. Again, it is all about building local relationships.



## GETTING THE MESSAGE ACROSS

[ReThink Media](#) offers expertise in strategic communications. Corey Saylor warns that as mission-driven activists all too often – “*We don’t know how to talk to people who don’t think like us*”. It is important to be ready to move outside our ‘comfort bubble’ to engage with people who may be anxious about immigration and the re-settlement of refugees (estimated as some 60%) of the population. The challenge is to identify an appropriate frame for effective communications – a frame that offers a way of looking at things in a manner that people can understand, that they can relate to and that takes their anxieties seriously. Messages need to be positive, to tell stories and that speak to people’s values. In other words, as Corey points out – “*Seize the moral high ground and invite people to join you*”. Invite people to be solution-focused. Sara Benitez, [Faith in Public Life](#) offers communications support to the faith community, which includes skills development and building a rapid response capability. This can be tailored to meet the requirements of specific church groups.

The importance of effective communications is also highlighted by the work of [Shoulder to Shoulder](#) and [MASA – No Muslim Ban Ever](#) who speak about the role that faith organisations play in confronting anti-Muslim bigotry in the USA. Shoulder to Shoulder has its origins in the 40 senior religious leaders who faced down anti-Muslim sentiment stirred up against proposals to build a Muslim community centre in the neighbourhood of Ground Zero in New York. Outlining the work of the organisation, Nina Marie Fernando argues that – *An attack on one religion is an attack on all of us*". The goal, she argues, is not to debunk the beliefs of others, but to uplift shared values and personal stories – *"How we trust others is a testament to our own values"*.



Deepa Iyer, from MASA – No Muslim Ban Ever – describes the impact of increased ethnic profiling (flying while brown), the vandalism of mosques and tacit permission to stereotype Muslims, with Muslim women being visible victims of hate crime. A Muslim Women’s Healing and Resistance Network offers support to individual women; arts and culture provide space for building solidarity; and the need to build bases of support is seen as a priority. A critique of the inter-faith movement is that it can sometimes fail to acknowledge and address structural discrimination experienced by Muslims.

In this context the work of [Bend the Arc](#) is interesting as a Jewish organisation working with the Muslim Public Affairs Council and in support of the Dreamers. Rabbi Jason Kimelman-Block introduced the three-fold mission as to (i) stand with



communities under attack; (ii) hold elected officials to account; and (iii) win local progressive victories. Drawing on the Jewish story of migration, persecution and exclusion, Rabbi Jason believes that – *“Part of our unique value is our own story”*. Bend the Arc launched EntryDenied.org, where visitors can take a quiz to see the barriers that their own forebears might experience if they were seeking entry to the USA today. Support is also available for people engaging in direct action, with rabbis bringing their protest to the floor of Congress.



The fact that Bend the Arc acts outside of traditional faith structures frees it up to take more radical action as necessary.

*When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall do him no wrong. You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.*

*Leviticus 19: 33-34*

Rev. Adam Taylor of the [Sojourners](#) agrees with the importance of effective communication, in his case through the medium of the Sojourner magazine and on-line presence, which aims – ‘*To equip and mobilise Christians to put our faith into action*’. Sojourners relate stories of where faith leaders can make a difference, particularly in the essential task of protecting the most vulnerable – Muslims, undocumented people and people of colour. People of faith are called to be prophetic. With a network of over 40,000 faith leaders, the Sojourners is reaching out to partner faith-based organisations working in the immigration-reform space, both in the USA and globally. The challenge is “*To speak to the insiders, for and with, the outsiders.*”

### *Participants on the Migration Learning Exchange (April 2018)*

