

A Bible Study and Discussion Guide

IMMIGRANTS AMONG US

A LUTHERAN FRAMEWORK FOR ADDRESSING IMMIGRATION ISSUES



THE LUTHERAN CHURCH—MISSOURI SYNOD



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CONTENTS

Introduction	2
1: Immigrant Neighbors Past and Present	3
<i>Biblical teaching on loving our neighbor</i>	
2: God's Law, Civil Law and the Neighbor	5
<i>Obeying the Fourth and Fifth Commandments</i>	
3: Living in God's Two Realms	6
<i>Citizens of heaven and earth</i>	
4: Who is My Neighbor?	8
<i>Our vocation, or calling, to serve our neighbor</i>	
Conclusion	10

Introduction

“For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me” (Matt. 25:35).

THIS DISCUSSION GUIDE is based on *Immigrants Among Us: A Lutheran Framework for Addressing Immigration Issues*, a 2012 report by the Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR) of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS). Concerning that CTCR report, Mark Amstutz, author of *Just Immigration: American Policy in Christian Perspective*, comments, “Owing to the care and depth with which this study was undertaken, it stands as a model of how to assess a complex public-policy concern from a biblical perspective. Indeed, of all the church pronouncements and studies on US immigration that have been published in the past two decades, the Missouri Synod’s report represents the most sophisticated and nuanced integration of biblical analysis with the challenge posed by contemporary immigration concerns, including the problem of unlawful migration.”¹

The *Immigrants Among Us* report does not present an official position of the LCMS regarding current debates on immigration. There are social, political and legal issues that are not decisively addressed by the Word of God and about which Christians may disagree. *Immigrants Among Us* is intended as a helpful resource for considering these challenging issues. The report helps us to see why thoughtful Christians may come to different conclusions about immigration and reminds us that both the immigrant *and* our fellow citizen are neighbors we are called to love.

The number of immigrants among us has increased, and the church is aware of the need to witness among people of all nations through its ministries of mission and mercy. The church must also consider its response to the needs, struggles, treatment, well-being and hopes of immigrants. The presence of immigrants who live in the United States illegally or without proper legal documentation has raised questions for LCMS workers and congregations concerning the church’s response to immigration issues in our day. The CTCR report *Immigrants Among Us* and this guide, prepared as a shortened version of this report to facilitate study and discussion, are offered to help congregations and individuals address these important issues.

¹ Mark R. Amstutz, *Just Immigration: American Policy in Christian Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 208.

1: Immigrant Neighbors Past and Present

“For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’”(GAL. 5:14).

Holy Scripture does not address the specific question of the church’s attitude toward illegal or undocumented immigrants, but it does speak to the basic attitude of God’s people toward immigrants (aliens, sojourners, strangers) who live among them. Recognizing this helps us to avoid giving absolute biblical answers to an issue Scripture does not directly address. Biblical values can and should inform our attitudes toward and actions among immigrants, even as we wrestle with challenging social and political questions.

Immigrants are included under God’s command to love our neighbor as ourselves. “Neighbor” (the Hebrew word *rea*) in God’s command applies first to the people of Israel, but also includes those outside of the covenant community, including the *ger* or stranger: “When a stranger sojourns with you in the land, you shall not do him 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” (LEV. 19:33–34; SEE ALSO LEV. 19:18).

Read Matt. 22:34–40. *What does it mean to love your neighbor “as yourself”?*

The Hebrew word *ger* can be translated in several ways — alien, foreigner, immigrant, sojourner or stranger — but we must not read *into* the Old Testament our contemporary understandings of these terms in ways that are not faithful to the original context and usage of the Hebrew word. Immigrants in Old Testament times did not live in our modern era of sovereign nation-states where immigration of foreign nationals is regulated according to state law. The commands to love and welcome the stranger in our midst are God’s law, but God’s Word also commands us to “be subject to the governing authorities” (ROM. 13:1). Therefore, we cannot ignore the demands that civil laws place on citizens and immigrants in today’s national and international contexts. We affirm the right of the state to establish laws and policies concerning immigration, including laws that limit immigration for the protection and welfare of its citizens. Matters such as national security and human trafficking are legitimate and necessary areas of concern for government leaders, who must seek to restrain evil and promote good (ROM. 13:3–4).

In Old Testament times the law of God governed both the spiritual and temporal affairs of Israel. Aliens or sojourners did not automatically receive all the benefits of God’s people. Leviticus 19:33–34 and similar texts show God’s command to Israel to love and care for the strangers in their midst, but other texts indicate that not all foreigners had the same status as Israelites. This may have been due in part to the link between kinship and the inheritance and ownership of land that characterized Israelite and other Near Eastern societies, a network no longer available to those who were immigrants.

Read Deut. 14:28–29 and Deut. 26:12–13. *Which groups were without land and inheritance? How were other Israelites to treat them?*

Sometimes, however, sojourners and others did not receive temporal and spiritual benefits because of the hardness of the Israelites’ hearts toward vulnerable neighbors even among their own people — a loveless attitude condemned in Scripture.

Read Deut. 24:14–18; 27:19; Ezek. 22:7 and Zech. 7:8–14. *What does God command concerning justice for sojourners, widows and others who dwell among the people of Israel?*

In the New Testament era, “Israel” refers to the Church, not to an ancient or modern nation called Israel (see ROM. 9:6–8). We must be careful not to use the political laws of ancient Israel as a biblical blueprint for defending or creating modern nation-state policies or laws. Christian immigrants belong to the spiritual Israel, that is to the Church, the Body of Christ. They are our brothers and sisters in Christ and heirs of all the spiritual rights and benefits of children of God. At the same time, in terms of today’s earthly nation-states, these same immigrants may reside in a nation legally or illegally. As citizens of the spiritual Israel (the church), Christian immigrants participate in all the spiritual blessings of God’s people through faith in Christ. At the same time, under the earthly state and its laws, these same brothers and sisters do not in every case share with Christian citizens of the state the same earthly rights and privileges under the civil law.

We should not use the Old Testament to argue for love of the immigrant in ways that diminish the importance of the rule of law in nation-states today. We must also be cautious about using distinctions between Israel and aliens made in the Old Testament to advocate for specific forms of immigration law today, or to argue that such ancient biblical distinctions directly apply to the

relationship between citizens and foreign nationals in contemporary nation-states.

How *should* Scripture inform our attitude toward immigrants today? The Bible invites us to see immigrants as our neighbors. Scripture tells us what was to motivate Israel's love for its immigrant neighbors and what such love meant (and still means) in concrete actions.

Read Ex. 22:21; 23:9; Lev. 19:33–34 and Deut. 10:19. *Why were the Israelites to love the sojourners and treat them fairly? Read Deut. 24:15; Ps. 146:9 and Zech. 7:8–10. How does God respond to the cries of the sojourner?*

God's Word tells us, "Let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth" (1 JOHN 3:18). Love for the neighbor, the sojourner, takes shape in concrete action. Aliens in Israel were neighbors who were some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged members of society.

Read Deut. 10:18–19; 24:14–15 and Mal. 3:5. *What basic needs are addressed in these verses? What other groups of vulnerable people are mentioned along with the sojourners?*

The New Testament also witnesses to God's compassion for the stranger. Jesus identified Himself as the stranger in need (see MATT. 25:31–40) and reached out in compassion to those who were outside of Israel. In his explanation of the Fifth Commandment in the Large Catechism, Martin Luther writes: "Therefore God rightly calls all persons murderers who do not offer counsel or assistance to those in need and peril of body and life. He will pass a most terrible sentence upon them at the Last Day, as Christ himself says. He will say: 'I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' That is to say, 'You would have permitted me and my family to die of hunger, thirst, and cold, to be torn to pieces by wild beasts, to rot in prison or perish from want.'"²

Read Matt. 15:21–28. *Why do the disciples respond to the woman as they do? Why do you think Jesus responds to the woman as He does? How does the woman address Jesus? What does she believe about Him? Read John 4:7–30. What gifts does Jesus offer to this woman, who is a "stranger," a despised outsider in Israel?*

² Martin Luther, "Large Catechism," in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 412.

The Old Testament witness to God's compassion for the stranger is also apparent in the teachings of the apostles. Early Christian concern for neighbors in need extended beyond the community of faith.

Read Gal. 6:9–10 and Heb. 13:2. *How should the believers treat strangers and those outside of the household of faith?*

While Scripture shows us that God wants His people to love the strangers and aliens by attending to their bodily and spiritual needs, Scripture does not speak directly concerning the church's response to contemporary immigration law or illegal immigration. However, God calls the church to reflect in her life His love for all people, including strangers. This is not merely a culturally bound concern, but God's will and command for His people in every time and place. Scripture offers us basic values that should inform our attitudes toward immigrants regardless of their status in society.

Although immigrants did not always share in the same temporal and spiritual blessings as God's people in the Old Testament, the divine command to love the alien as our neighbor remains valid and is not tied to the fulfillment of any specific obligations on the part of the alien. The legal or illegal status of strangers among us cannot determine the church's concern about the basic dignity of aliens and their families as God's creatures, their need for food and clothing and a fuller life for their families, their fair and just treatment in society, and their need to hear the Gospel and receive the Sacraments.

The Ten Commandments guide us in giving shape and substance to the love we share with others, including our concern for our immigrant neighbors' physical, social, economic and spiritual needs. Flowing from love for God, our love for our neighbors seeks their spiritual and physical well-being.

Review the Ten Commandments (and the explanations as found in the *Small Catechism*). *How might each of the commandments help you to give concrete shape to love for your neighbor?*

By serving as a point of departure for shaping the church's basic attitude toward immigrants today, the biblical teachings on loving the immigrant neighbor as ourselves and on showing hospitality to the strangers in our midst also serve as a good deterrent against the development of any attitudes toward aliens, whether documented or undocumented, that are not driven by a legitimate concern for the law and the neighbor. Faith

and charity compel all Christians not to form their final judgments concerning aliens on the basis of discourse and opinions that are fueled by unfounded fears or myths concerning immigrants and/or racist or discriminatory attitudes against people of other ethnic groups and nationalities. The remembrance of the Missouri Synod's own immigrant past, including the fears and prejudices endured by many of our Lutheran fathers and mothers in the faith upon arrival to the United States, should help us to foster a charitable disposition toward immigrants today. However, beyond appeals to our own historic immigrant identity, stand the clear and timeless will and command of God in the Scriptures concerning the church's need to remember and care for the immigrant neighbor.

2: God's Law, Civil Law and the Neighbor

"Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor" (1 PETER 2:17).

Scripture instructs us to submit to the authorities whom God has sent and appointed for our good. Submission to the authorities means obedience to the laws they create, implement and enforce. While Scripture does not offer a specific position on immigration law, it does bind Christians to obey the civil authorities, including laws dealing with immigration (regarding civil disobedience, see below).

Read Rom. 13:1–7 and 1 Peter 2:13–17. *How are we to respond to the governing authorities? How do these verses inform our response to immigrants and to immigration law?*

Martin Luther included the promotion of our neighbor's life under the Fifth Commandment, and taught submission to the authorities under the Fourth Commandment. Both commandments are the will of God and must be carried out.

Read the Fourth and Fifth Commandments, given below with their explanations. *How do these commandments inform our response to immigrants and immigration law?*

The Fourth Commandment: *Honor your father and your mother. What does this mean? We should fear and love God so that we do not despise or anger our parents and other authorities, but honor them, serve and obey them, love and cherish them.*

The Fifth Commandment: *You shall not murder. What does this mean? We should fear and love God so that we do not hurt or harm our neighbor in his body, but help and support him in every physical need.³*

Given the equally valid demands of these two commandments, it is not uncommon for us, as brothers and sisters in Christ, to argue among ourselves about the best ways to be faithful to what God desires of His people. Christians who speak of *undocumented* immigrants may seek to affirm the basic dignity of immigrants (the Fifth and Eighth Commandments), showing sensitivity to their plight and the need to promote their well-being. They may place lesser emphasis on current demands of the civil law regarding the legal or illegal status of immigrants. Some may even disagree with current immigration law, considering it inadequate to address the fair treatment of immigrants. On the other hand, Christians who speak more readily of *illegal* immigrants may focus on the need for obedience to the civil law (the Fourth Commandment) as it applies to current immigration law. They may be viewed as insensitive to the plight of immigrants and uncritical concerning problems in current immigration law that may not adequately address fair treatment.

Christians who give priority to obedience to the civil authorities (Fourth Commandment) in their approach to immigration are not necessarily insensitive to the plight of immigrants and their families. On the other hand, Christians who give priority to the fair treatment of immigrants and their families (Fifth Commandment) in their approach to immigration are not necessarily insensitive to the need for obedience to the civil authorities and the laws of the land. Adjectives such as *illegal* and *undocumented* may show different, yet legitimate, Christian attitudes in dealing with immigrants, and we must remember that such terms have limitations. Since these adjectives are neither commanded nor forbidden in Scripture, we are not prohibited from using them. Yet while using them, we should do so carefully, clearly and with charity.

³ *Luther's Small Catechism with Explanation* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 14.

Read Col. 4:5–6 and James 1:19–21. *What do these verses say about our use of language, including our discussions of immigration and immigration law?*

Scripture requires us to obey God rather than man when the civil authority and its laws are set in opposition to the law of God (ACTS 5:29). But *when* is that the case in current immigration law? Most Christians are not against immigration law in general, but some question *how* fair and reasonable some aspects of such law are in specific cases. What is our appropriate response when there is no clear consensus among Christians on the way in which immigration law conflicts with God’s law?

If a Christian considers a civil law to be in direct conflict with the higher law of God, and decides to engage in some form of civil disobedience, he is encouraged to “carry out his act of disobedience in a nonviolent manner,” and “direct his act of disobedience as precisely as possible against the specific law or practice which violates his conscience.” He must also be willing to bear the cross and suffer the “punitive consequences” of his actions.⁴ Since we may not always agree in discussions of immigration law, we should exercise great care in judging one another in our different responses to complex social problems and apply Christian love to these specific discussions and disagreements.

Read Eph. 4:29–32 and James 5:9–11. *In your discussions and interactions, even with those with whom you disagree, how can you reflect the love and forgiveness of Christ?*

As residents or citizens of a nation, we are also called to love our citizen-neighbors, those with whom we share a common national identity. There are times when a moral dilemma arises in the matter of obedience to two equally valid demands placed on us by God’s law of love. Therefore, some logical priority must be given to one neighbor over another in a specific situation. In such cases, one sins boldly for the sake of a neighbor and suffers the consequences of one’s actions. Some argue, for instance, that a citizen has an obligation to put his fellow citizen first. This approach will inevitably place one’s immigrant neighbor further down in the scale of priority. Others argue, however, that a foreigner who has lived long enough in the nation without recourse to proper documentation is no longer just an alien but one of those who shares the way of life of the citizens and residents of the state, and therefore citizens should now have moral

obligations toward them.

Read Gal. 5:13–15. *How might the apostle’s admonition and warning apply to our discussions concerning immigrants and immigration law? Read Jer. 29:7.* *How might the prophet’s message to the exiles apply today both to immigrants and to resident citizens?*

Because we cannot fulfill the law of God perfectly for every neighbor in need every time and in every situation, we will always need to search our hearts and examine our attitudes and actions, honestly confess our sins, gratefully receive Christ’s forgiveness and strive to do better with the help of the Holy Spirit.

3: Living in God’s Two Realms

“Our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ” (PHIL. 3:20).

Mark Amstutz, the author of *Just Immigration*, comments that the *Immigrants Among Us* report by the CTCR “focuses on two imperatives — love of neighbor and obedience to the authorities — and illuminates the different tasks and responsibilities that arise in the spiritual realm and in the temporal realm” and highlights the inherent tension between the two imperatives and the two kingdoms.⁵ This inherent tension is evident in the differences of opinion among Christians on the issue of illegal immigration, reflecting our need to obey the command to love our neighbor and to obey the command to submit to the ruling authorities. Such tension is an attempt to be faithful to our callings as citizens of heaven and as citizens of an earthly nation. Christian attitudes about illegal immigration are often shaped by a genuine desire to live faithfully in God’s two realms or kingdoms.

According to Scripture’s teaching on the two kingdoms, God works on behalf of His fallen creation in two ways and to accomplish two distinct goals. In the spiritual realm (also known as the right-hand kingdom), God saves and preserves His fallen creation by forgiving sinners for the sake of Christ. In the temporal realm (also known as the left-hand kingdom), God protects and preserves His fallen creation by promoting peace

⁴ *Civil Obedience and Disobedience* (LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations, 1966), 5, at lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcme&id=367.

⁵ Amstutz, *Just Immigration*, 212.

and justice in society. Through the “sword” (ROM. 13:4), that is, through secular authorities, God uses governments to restrain sinners from evil and to reward good behavior in society.

In the spiritual realm, God works through His church as it carries out activities that center in the message of justification by grace through faith in Christ. In the temporal realm, God works through civil government as it carries out activities that promote justice, peace and order in civil society. We must not confuse the activities of the two kingdoms. For example, it is not the God-given responsibility of the church to formulate, enact and enforce immigration laws. It is not the God-given responsibility of the secular authorities to proclaim the Gospel, administer the Sacraments or promote works of mercy that flow from the Gospel.

Read 1 John 3:16–18 and James 2:1–5. *Is obedience to God’s will as expressed in these verses a confusion of the two kingdoms? Why or why not?*

God’s purposes for the two kingdoms are confused when requirements to obey civil laws concerning the legal status of immigrants conflict with the church’s responsibility to proclaim the Gospel to them and do the works of mercy among them without regard to their legal status. For example, such interference would happen if civil legislation penalized individual Christians or church workers with fines or imprisonment for proclaiming the Gospel to undocumented immigrants or doing mercy work among them. Civil regulations that prevent Christians from visiting persons in immigration detention centers could also be an example of such interference.

Consider these issues and questions:

* *Should a Lutheran congregation employ a lawn service to maintain church landscaping, knowing that a good share of the employees of that company may not be documented?*⁶

* *A pastor comments: “One of our members has a pretty good theological education but is here illegally. He has been in charge of our Hispanic congregation for some time. Will we get in trouble with the law if we call and employ him? If we ask him to leave to return to his home country, he won’t be able to minister to his people here or support his family here or there.”*⁷

⁶ Douglas Groll, “Theological Observer: Pastoral Questions about Immigration Problems,” *Concordia Journal* 32, no. 2 (April 2006): 130.

⁷ Groll, “Pastoral Questions,” 129.

Confusion of the two realms also happens when the church’s zeal to proclaim the Gospel interferes with the government’s responsibility to regulate and enforce immigration laws according to what is reasonable and just. While it is possible within the spiritual kingdom for immigrants to volunteer in church activities — even in duties related to the ministry of the Gospel — without holding a green card or a special visa allowing them to work in the United States legally, employment practices are still a matter regulated by the state. The church as a legal entity is bound to adhere to such laws and regulations in the temporal realm.

Read Rom. 12:9. *How might this verse be put into action in a way that confuses the two kingdoms? In what ways is it possible to follow the commands of this verse without confusing the kingdoms?*

The two kingdoms must not be confused, but there is also a relationship between the two. They can never be completely separated on this side of heaven. While the state should not restrict the church’s proclamation of the Gospel and pastoral care to all people regardless of their legal status, the government does have a role in regulating the work of the church as an institution in the left-hand realm.

While the church does not tell the civil government how to legislate, Christians may point out sin and injustice to the civil authorities when the authorities do not act in a godly manner. Not just as individuals, but as a church body, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has pointed out that abortion is sin and has made its position official. But *how* and *when* is this to be done in the case of immigration law? Could or should it be done publicly as Synod in the case of certain immigration laws? Or does the LCMS, perhaps more humbly, lay out the issues, the tools for Lutheran interpretation and analysis in responsible Christian decision-making? This approach lets *individual* Christians make their own decisions, with some guidance from the Synod. The LCMS has traditionally taken this more private and individual direction with societal and political issues where black-and-white is not easily determined.

Read Acts 22:22–29. *How does Paul use his Roman citizenship to point out an injustice about to be committed by the Roman tribune in Jerusalem? **Read Acts 25:1–12.** How does Paul use his earthly citizenship to claim his legal rights?*

The Lutheran distinction between the two kingdoms reminds us that disagreements about immigration law

among us should not infringe upon our unity in Christ, which is created and preserved by the Means of Grace. We acknowledge that, among Lutherans who sincerely want to show mercy to their immigrant neighbors and obey the civil authorities, there can be a range of opinions concerning what is — and what is not — just and best for the common good.

Read Eph. 4:1–6. *How might we “maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” with regard to disagreements about immigrants and immigration laws?*

Of course, our standing before God does not depend on our fulfillment of the law. As Christians, we should exercise our vocations with joy and responsibility in the left-hand realm. We may disagree on left-hand issues, and even criticize those (including brothers and sisters in Christ) who hold positions in government, but we should be careful about condemning Christians for carrying out their vocations. We must not seek to use our freedom in the Gospel to justify or promote irresponsible opinions on this or that law. Instead, we should use our freedom to serve others, for the good of our neighbors.

4: Who is My Neighbor?

“But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’” (LUKE 10:29).

Vocation is the calling God gives each of us to serve our neighbor through the exercise of certain tasks and responsibilities. In the context of our God-given vocation, or station in life, we have opportunities to fulfill God’s command to love our neighbor as ourselves. We typically have more than one vocation and, therefore, more than one neighbor to attend to in this life.⁸ To have such vocations is God’s created intent for us.

Read Gen. 2:5–9; 15–17; 21–22 and Gen. 3:17–19. *What vocations did Adam have? Did the fall into sin change his vocations? Why or why not?*

Work is an earthly means instituted by our Creator through which He blesses, provides for, protects and sustains His creation. Martin Luther described such earthly

⁸ Our vocations include our relationships, such as husband or wife, father or mother, son or daughter, grandparent, aunt or uncle and so on, as well as our daily work both in and outside of the home. Our vocations may change over time as our relationships and circumstances change.

work as a “mask” behind which God Himself hides and works and provides what we and others need to live.⁹ God gives the world workers and rulers of all kinds who, through their labors, contribute to the well-being of many neighbors.

Read 2 Cor. 9:8–11; Eph. 2:10 and Heb. 13:20–21. *What do these verses suggest about the ways in which God is at work in and through us as we serve others in our various vocations?*

God instituted the church already from the beginning by creating our first parents to live in communion with Him in the Garden. He restores His creatures to communion with Himself through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. God has provided the world with the church, her ministers and individual members to proclaim the Gospel of redemption in Christ and so contribute to the spiritual well-being of many neighbors.

Read Luke 14:12–24. *Jesus’ parable about the great banquet is not speaking of immigrants, but of inviting people into the kingdom of God through the proclamation of the Gospel. Are there certain aspects of this parable, however, that might address our response to immigrants? Why or why not?*

To be a created being means to have vocations and neighbors for whom we care. But who is my neighbor? My neighbor is anyone who needs my help, yet if everyone is my neighbor in general, the danger is that no one will be my neighbor concretely. When speaking about immigrants who are in the United States illegally, one must remember that each person has a different story and experience. Some are victims of trafficking. Some do not have legal status due to violence and exploitation by another party. Many entered the United States legally but overstayed their visas for any number of reasons, including family reunification issues, fear of persecution or the desire to provide their children a more dignified life. A number have come to this country to engage in criminal acts. Immigration is not merely an issue about law in some general sense, but about the individuals who are our neighbors. Our callings, or our vocations, allow us to put a human face on debates concerning immigration law, without providing easy answers about solutions to challenging and complex situations.

⁹ “What else is all our work to God — whether in the fields, in the garden, in the city, in the house, in war, or in government — but just such a child’s performance, by which He wants to give His gifts in the fields, at home, and everywhere else? These are the masks of God, behind which He wants to remain concealed and do all things.” Martin Luther, “Psalm 147,” *Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, vol. 14 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1958), 114.

How do the following ministries put “a human face” on immigration debates? In what concrete ways do they serve their neighbors?

* [Rev. Doug] Wagley [of New Vision Lutheran Church in Spokane, Wash.] said visitors are welcomed to the church because their language has been incorporated into the Divine Service. “We use Karen (and sometimes Burmese) as well as Vietnamese in our services. We have the confessions and creeds and prayers from the catechism in their language. We also do Scripture readings in various languages,” said Wagley.¹⁰

* In addition to providing basic necessities and transition assistance for newly arrived immigrants, the grant [for Zion International in Milwaukee, Wis.] also has allowed for much-needed maintenance on the church van that is used to transport African immigrants to and from church as well as to and from work, until they can earn enough money to buy their own transportation.¹¹

* Concerning Ysleta Lutheran Mission Human Care in El Paso, Texas, a Cuban refugee says, “From the moment I got here, it is like being at home ... It’s like the people have known you all your life. You don’t feel strange; you don’t feel overprotected nor overvalued, they treat me with respect and admiration, the way human beings should be treated.”¹²

* In McAllen, Texas, the Upbring New Hope Children’s Center, a Recognized Service Organization of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, works with the U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement to provide emergency shelter for undocumented children. During their stay with Upbring, the physical and emotional health of the children is assessed and they “live in a homelike setting while receiving daily instruction and regular outdoor recreational time” until they are reunited with a sponsor or family member.¹³

Vocation allows us to argue boldly and persuasively for our neighbors, encouraging us to take a stand for

¹⁰ Erik M. Lunsford, “Care for New Americans in the Church,” *Lutherans Engage the World*, Sept. 27, 2017, at engage.lcms.org/new-americans-fall-2017. Karen is a language spoken in Myanmar (formerly known as Burma).

¹¹ Roger Drinnon, “Many People, But One Church,” *Lutherans Engage the World*, Sept. 28, 2017, at engage.lcms.org/one-church-fall-2017.

¹² Erik M. Lunsford, “Ministry in El Paso Extends Mercy to Cuban Sojourners,” *Lutherans Engage the World*, Sept. 4, 2016, at engage.lcms.org/ministry-to-cuban-sojourners-fall-2016.

¹³ Cheryl Magness, “Upbring: Caring for children — on the border and worldwide,” *Reporter*, July/Aug. 2018, 3, at blogs.lcms.org/2018/upbring-caring-for-children-on-the-border-and-worldwide.

the people whom we are to love and serve. For example, the governor of a state might argue for tougher enforcement measures against immigrants who reside in the state illegally to protect state residents against violence, human trafficking and other crimes. In doing so, the governor serves his or her neighbors, the citizens of the state, by advocating for their safety and quality of life. Border patrol agents fulfill their vocations by stopping immigrants who want to cross into the United States without a proper visa. This is the main duty through which these agents promote national security on behalf of the citizens of the nation who are their neighbors. Since we are faced with many neighbors asking for our attention, our specific vocations help us to define *who* are our closest neighbors (those toward whom we bear the greatest God-given responsibility), what neighbor’s needs we should deal with *first* and *how* to do so.

Tension often arises as we wrestle with the obligation to love our neighbor in everyday life. Even as we are called to “do good to everyone,” we are also encouraged to show special concern for “the household of faith” (GAL. 6:10). Our Lord chided the Pharisees for a convoluted ethic that resulted in neglect of family members in the name of other religious priorities (MARK 7:10–12). Such references remind us that love for our neighbor always involves particular individuals and that our Lord expects love for our neighbor to begin with our families and other neighbors who are closest to us.

Read Luke 10:25–37. How is the “neighbor” identified in this parable? How might Jesus’ parable help us as we seek to love and serve immigrants and our fellow citizens?

When the lawyer in the parable of the Good Samaritan asks, “Who is my neighbor?” he is attempting to deflect attention away from himself to avoid the command to love. His question implies that there are some people who are *not* his neighbor. But our Lord showed in His ministry that *no one* is excluded from His love. While no Christian can do good in equal measure to every neighbor, we should never assume that God would have us exclude anyone from the love of neighbor to which we have been called.

A measure of conflict and uncertainty is inevitable in a sinful world with so many competing issues calling for our attention and so many types of neighbors calling for our help. Our neighbors — in a good and real sense — are our burdens and crosses to bear (GAL. 6:2).

Read Lev. 23:22 and Deut. 24:17–22. Who were the “neighbors” living among the Israelites? What were the

Israelites to do for these neighbors? What were the Israelites to remember about their own history?

Commenting on Christ's words "do not resist the one who is evil" (MATT. 5:39), Martin Luther speaks of "God's kingdom inwardly and the kingdom of the world outwardly": "In the one case, you consider yourself and what is yours; in the other, you consider your neighbor and what is his. In what concerns you and yours, you govern yourself by the gospel and suffer injustice toward yourself as a true Christian; in what concerns the person or property of others, you govern yourself according to love and tolerate no injustice toward your neighbor."¹⁴ As an individual Christian, for instance, you might turn the other cheek privately and even suffer personally some injustice. However, if you are called to a certain office or vocation, you can no longer act individually, but must now give priority to and come to the defense of those neighbors you are called to defend in your office and station. The law of God calls us to serve every single neighbor — even our enemies — when the opportunity arises (LUKE 6:27–28). One cannot attempt to fulfill God's law in some abstract sense without some concrete neighbor in mind.

In his vocation as a border patrol agent, an officer is bound to stop even the neediest neighbor from crossing the border into the United States. In doing so, the border patrol agent puts his office above his own personal or private relationships to immigrant neighbors. Yet, as an individual Christian, that same border agent may show compassion to the immigrant who is coming illegally into the United States, taking care of his basic needs for food and shelter, protecting him from "coyotes" (smugglers) and others who might want to harm him. He may also share the Gospel with immigrants — whether here legally or illegally — in his neighborhood and serve their needs through his congregation's mercy programs in the community.

Even though a husband and father knows that crossing the border without a proper visa is an illegal act, his vocation as father may compel him to choose to cross into the United States to find safety, work and peace for his loved ones simply because he is bound to care for those whom God has put in his life. *What do you think you would do in this situation? How might your response change if the father comes alone? How would you respond if the father brings his family?*

¹⁴ Martin Luther, "Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed," *Luther's Works*, ed. Walther I. Brandt, vol. 45 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1962), 96.

Read Luke 3:10–14. *John the Baptist does not tell tax collectors or soldiers to abandon their vocations. How are they to "bear fruits in keeping with repentance" as they carry out those vocations?*

Lutheran theology leaves room for disagreement among Christians on left-hand realm issues without disrupting unity in Christ. While Lutheran theology clearly affirms the responsibility of Christians to obey the civil authorities, it also leaves room for Christians to hold various opinions about how best to ensure justice and righteousness in specific aspects of immigration law.

Read Lev. 25:23; 1 Peter 2:11–12 and Heb. 11:13–16. *Why are God's people regarded as sojourners and exiles?*

Conclusion

In this discussion guide, the importance of keeping *two* truths from God's Word has been emphasized over and over — and it should be. On the one hand, the Scriptures of both the Old and the New Testaments proclaim the truth that God's children are to love their neighbor as themselves. The neighbor will certainly include at times people whom we might regard as strangers or foreigners, as well as immigrants. On the other hand, God is the one who has instituted the good gift of civil governments, and His children are commanded to be subject to and obey the authorities who rule over them — as long as those authorities do not command us to break God's will as clearly expressed in the Scriptures. At all times, Christians must hold fast to both of these truths, and that is not an easy thing to do. This is one of the reasons why sincere and faithful Christians may not always agree on how best to carry out God's will in relation to immigrants among us.

All of this reminds us of the struggle of the Christian life in a fallen world. Our sin is ever before us (Ps. 51:3) and our whole life is one of repentance. Forgiveness in Christ is constantly needed both for our obvious sins and for the times when we must choose what appears to be "the lesser of two evils." None of this shakes our confidence in God's word of forgiveness, even as we seek to do better. We often fail to help our neighbor and we do not fulfill all that the law demands of us. We all sin in various ways as we seek to fulfill our vocations. Repentance and

forgiveness in Christ Jesus are necessary as we engage in conversations about what is best for various neighbors and attempt to better carry out our vocations for the sake of these neighbors — including immigrants among us.

For additional information, case studies and discussion questions, see *Immigrants Among Us: A Lutheran Framework for Addressing Immigration Issues* (LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations, 2012), 47–60 at [lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=2194](https://www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=2194).