

Part 9: We are an immigrant conference.

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Immigration is an unavoidable topic of conversation in our country these days. In Europe, we are watching a crisis unfold as countries erect fences to keep out refugees from Syria, Afghanistan and other distressed countries. Closer to home we hear political candidates use bigoted language about immigrants in order to score cheap political points. These harsh responses toward immigrants are not available to us whose stories have been shaped by migration. For some of us, our place in this country is connected to forced migration like the displacement of First Nations or the abduction and enslavement of Africans. Others of us trace our stories through ancestors who chose to immigrate to this country, who left behind particular hardships and even persecutions in order to make a fresh start.

Apart from our individual stories, the Bible provides a response to immigration that is far more generous than we often see around us. As Matthew Soerens of World Relief [recently wrote](#),

The Bible does talk about immigrants—a lot. The Hebrew word for an immigrant, ger, appears 92 times in the Old Testament. Nearly every time you read about God's concern for the orphan and the widow, the immigrant (or the alien, foreigner, sojourner, or stranger, depending upon your English translation) will be there as well, and we cannot be faithful to the authority of Scripture without applying that to our contemporary reality.

This biblical perspective ties immigration to some of the other essays in this series. Priorities such as hospitality and justice should impact our response to those who feel their only option is to leave behind all they have ever known.

Beyond these responses to immigrants is an immigrant culture that exists within the Central Conference that is critical to our mission of starting, strengthening, and uniting churches. In a sermon preached in 1978, North Park College professor of history, Zenos Hawkinson, traced back our denomination's immigrant culture to its first days.

Our spiritual parents in the Covenant Church, too, became wanderers across stormy seas, carrying their pathetic little sea chests, all that remained of the old life - a handful of clothes, a piece of needlework, a pot or a pan, a copper kettle and hope. And our parents, too, searched for a city not made with hands, for a haven from the storm, for land from which to feed their children, for space in which their spirits could expand, for the possibility of new life in new dignity. And if it is possible for the Lord God to move the children of Israel from Egypt, then it is possible for the Lord God to move the children of Europe to America. (Anatomy of the Pilgrim Experience, 62).

By pointing to their shared past, Hawkinson was calling his hearers to consider God's call in the present. Rather than succumb to American "careful, anxious middle-class consciousness" (69), he asked the congregation to remember the holy God who guided their migration and to allow him - and not their adopted homeland - to shape their priorities. Even then, in 1978, Hawkinson understood that those Swedish immigrants represented a larger movement and he challenged the Covenant to stand ready for God's call.

A few days ago, I had coffee with a Korean American church planter who was introducing me to a Nepalese immigrant pastor. The church planter shared with the Nepalese pastor that the Covenant was a good fit for him and his new, diverse congregation because the denomination retained a strong memory of its own immigrant history. He went on to share specific ways he and his church plant have been welcomed and experienced a deep connection in mission. This is what it means to be an immigrant conference: to remember our identity as pilgrim people whose identity comes not first from our country, but from the God who has called and kept us.

Bible Study

Psalm 107:1-15

Psalm 107 is the first psalm in Book V, the final collection of the Psalms. This psalm gives four examples of the "steadfast love" of the Lord (4-9; 10-16; 17-22; 23-32). Zenos Hawkinson took the first fifteen verses as his text for his sermon in 1978.

Questions:

1. What is your family's story of immigration or migration? What are the painful aspects of this story?
2. Verses 1-3 ask the worshippers to focus on God's love, redemption, and rescue from trouble. What are the ways God has shown you (and your family) his favor through the immigrant themes of your story?
3. Hawkinson was preaching to a people who were in danger of forgetting the desperation and dependence on God that was common to their immigrant ancestors. Reflecting on Psalm 107, he challenged his hearers:

If you have come out of the pilgrim tradition of the children of Israel, from Egypt to the promised Land, and have used that magnificent opportunity only to become a Philistine, then take heed. Do you live comfortably behind high walls and bronzed gates, and worship regularly at the altar of Baal? Are you pleased with the prospects of Social Security and a special pension plan, or the apparent security of America's nuclear deterrent and the overwhelming power of its society and technology? If that provides comfort, then live in fear and trembling, because it will all be taken away from you as surely as the security of our forebears. I proclaim it. (69)

In what ways have you been tempted to “become a Philistine?” What are the particular ways that the American dream has become more attractive than our identity as God’s pilgrim people?

4. Verses 4-9 describe a people who were lost in the wilderness, without a homeland. Perhaps the psalmist has in mind the time between Israel’s liberation from Egypt and their arrival in the Promised Land. Who are the individuals and communities within your influence who are experiencing this desperation and dislocation? How might God be calling you to join him in their deliverance?
5. It may seem counterintuitive, but remembering our own particular immigrant past makes us more open to the diversity of people who God has called to our Covenant churches. We can see this in God’s command for his people to welcome immigrants (Deuteronomy 10:18-19) and in image Paul uses of a tree into which branches have been grafted (Romans 11). In what ways can your congregation remember its specific immigrant stories in order to see and welcome those whose stories (and languages, customs, and histories) may differ from yours?