

***CRIBB<S>NOTE - MAY 3, 2009***

Immigrant Rights Sunday is a new event in the life of the United Church of Christ. Although our denomination has been actively involved in advocating for the rights of immigrants, this is the first time we have designated a Sunday to focus our attention on the challenges many people face when they arrive in the United States.

One of the most controversial issues debated in Congress deals with immigration. Actually, this is a subject that dates back to the founding years of this nation. Although many of the men who argued against making the new country a safe haven for immigrants, people flowed into the United States from Europe and Africa in large numbers.

Ironically, indigenous peoples on this land had received the settlers, at least initially, with welcoming hospitality. For the most part, there was curiosity about the foreigners who landed on the Eastern Shores, but resources were shared to alleviate conditions of malnutrition, thirst, and weariness. Many of the European settlers were ill; others had died on board vessels as they crossed the Atlantic Ocean.

Among the early Africans arriving in the New World, their plight was one of involuntary servitude and slavery. Bound together and packed in the hulls of ships, they were transported to ports from New Amsterdam to the Carolinas against their will. They were aliens in a strange place far from their homelands.

Today, people continue to make passage into the United States as they traverse hot deserts, cold mountains, oceans, and a great land mass. Many continue a long tradition of nomadic patterns to visit blood relatives and find work. They come because of connections made through foreign policies that link nations together. Global economic practices create conditions that make people dependent on others who reside great distances apart.

Those of us who live in Southern California witness the movements of families and individuals who cross the International Border at San Ysidro, the busiest border crossing in the world. In recent years, the government of the United States has taken drastic measures to fortify and militarize that stretch of land from the Pacific Ocean to Texas in an effort to stymie immigrants from entering this country.

The people of God were given very specific commandments about how to receive and welcome foreigners. God said, "You shall love the foreigner as yourself, for you were foreigners."

Too often the treatment of immigrants does not reflect how God instructed us to love them. Instead, the most vulnerable, desperate and poorest foreigners are abused, stigmatized, incarcerated, and made scapegoats for many of the social and economic problems we face as a nation. It is unfair and wrong. Indeed, it is sinful because such treatment violates the exact and clear commandment of God.

As we observe this first Immigrant Rights Sunday, let us consider how we can comply with God's commandment. Let us together determine how this congregation can work on behalf of the immigrants who are mistreated because of their legal status. God has told us how we are to receive and love them. Let us do just that.