



For You Were Once a Stranger: Summary and Users Guide

Interfaith Worker Justice (IWJ) recently created *For You Were Once a Stranger*, a resource book for the faith community on issues of immigration in the United States. The book runs 112 pages, and includes individual stories and faith-based essays, policy analysis, liturgical resources, reflection questions to guide study and discussion groups, and ideas for taking action. A pdf of *For You Were Once a Stranger* can be found at <http://www.iwj.org/index.cfm/immigration>.

While the book is a rich resource for the faith community, IWJ realizes that everyone will not work through all of its pages. We are creating this short summary and guide for using the handbook to assist congregations, denominations, interfaith groups and others to fully participate in this rich and difficult conversation.

Everyone involved in the debate about immigration in the U.S., from all political and moral persuasions, recognizes that the current system isn't working. There is no system in place that fairly and equitably meets the needs of migrant workers who come to this country because of the impoverishment of their own societies; of businesses who seek an expanded labor market to fill what they see are chronic labor shortages; and of U.S. born workers threatened by a perceived competition for scarce jobs.

The Prophetic Voice—What do our religious traditions teach us?

While immigration issues should be analyzed in the context of today's political landscape and economic challenges, the religious community can and must inject the dimensions of justice and morality. People and communities of faith have struggled for millennia with the question of our obligations to people who are outsiders to our communities—strangers. An interfaith group that came together in 2006 in support of comprehensive immigration reform, wrote:

The Hebrew Bible tells us: “The strangers who sojourn with you shall be to you as the natives among you, and you shall love them as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Leviticus 19:33-34).

In the New Testament, Jesus tells us to welcome the stranger (cf. Matthew 25:35), for “what you do to the least of my brethren, you do unto me (Matthew 25:40).”

The Qur'an tells us that we should “serve God...and do good to...orphans, those in need, neighbors who are near, neighbors who are strangers, the companion by your side, the wayfarer that you meet, [and those who have nothing]” (4:36).

The Hindu scripture Taitiriya Upanishad tells us: “The guest is a representative of God” (1.11.2).

While the teachings are clear, the actions of religious bodies have sometimes mirrored the fears and prejudices of the larger society. Yet there have always been prophetic voices in US history, from John Wesley standing up against forced Christianization of Native Americans, to the religious community standing alongside communities of color in the civil rights movements and standing up for immigrants today. The prophetic voice also calls out in defiance of those who sow fear, division and hatred and in defense of all workers, native born and immigrant alike, whose ability to live with dignity are undermined by corporate and government policies.

Religious resources available in *For You Were Once a Stranger* include:

1. **Chapter 1: Introduction (1-3).** Summary of the problem with today’s immigration system and economy; the solution, elements needed for just and rational comprehensive immigration reform; and the Call of Faith.
2. **Chapter 7: The Prophetic Voice—The Religious Community Responds (25-33).** Profiles of communities and organizations that have resisted the rise of anti-immigrant sentiment and legislation, including Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, Jewish and Sikh groups.
3. **Chapter 8: Sanctuary-Communities and Congregations Stand Tall (35-37).** Provides background on the faith-based sanctuary movement of the 1980s in support of Central Americans fleeing civil wars, and the New Sanctuary Movement launched in 2007 in support of immigrant families with American citizen children.
4. **Chapter 9: Faith in Action (38-41).** A practical set of actions that religious groups can take to lift up the moral and prophetic voice in the immigration debates.

Following the chapters, *For You Were Once a Stranger* includes resources that can be used for study, prayer services, materials for sermons and other liturgical purposes, as well as public policy statements on immigration by religious bodies.

5. **Resource Section H: Immigrants in the Jewish, Muslim and Christian Texts (70-72).** Verses from the Hebrew Bible, the Christian Testament, and the Qur’an.
6. **Resource Section I: Interfaith Prayers (73-75).**
7. **Resource Section J: Jewish Resources and Tools (76-79).**
8. **Resource Section K: Liturgical Resources for the Christian Community (80-81).**

9. Resource Section L: Policy Statements From the Religious Community (82-93)

The Power and Use of Stories

Stories provide a human face to the issue of immigration. Maria and her husband came to Chicago from Mexico in the 1970s, and the crossing was a harrowing experience. Her son was sick with an ear infection. He had not seen his father, who had crossed earlier, and began calling “Papa, papa,” at two men—who turned out to be immigration agents. But Maria and her husband made a life for themselves and their children.

But the fear of deportation haunts Maria today. Maria tells of her experience with U.S. courts, after being arrested at a workplace raid. The family hired a lawyer who assured her everything would be fine, but the lawyer didn’t show up at the fateful court date. Maria was handcuffed and whisked away to the airport, and flown immediately to Mexico. She got back to Chicago—her husband and two children were there. When applying for residency years later, Maria was denied, she was told, because of her earlier arrest and deportation.

Resource Section G: Stories of Immigrants (63-69) includes the stories of three immigrant families in their own words, including interviews of the children, parents and grandparents of Somalia refugee Mohammed Hassan’s family and the Quiroz family from Michoacan, Mexico.

For You Were Once a Stranger invites you to examine your own family’s immigration story, whether it was voluntary or forced, what the conditions were that propelled your ancestors to leave their homes, cultures and families often to work at the bottom rung of the U.S. job ladder. It invites you to talk with immigrants within your community and congregation, and understand the power of their stories.

Comprehensive Immigration Reform- What Do We Want?

For You Were Once a Stranger includes two chapters that provide a solid public policy framework for understanding immigration issues today:

Chapter 3: Unraveling the National Debate 1: The Problem (7-12).

Chapter 4: Unraveling the National Debate 2: The Solution (13-16).

Polling has indicated that large majorities in the U.S. support a path to legal status for the bulk of the undocumented population. While conservatives focus on our southern border and the Bush administration steps up military style workplace raids, few seriously believe that the 12 million undocumented people in the U.S. today should be rounded up and deported. But immigrants without proper documentation live in fear that they may be separated from their families, and “guest workers” are denied the labor law protections that are given all other workers, creating a debased and underpaid second-class workforce which depresses standards for everybody, particularly workers in low-wage jobs.

Comprehensive immigration reform must aim to provide full and equal protections of employment and labor laws, civil liberties and civil rights for all workers in the U.S. Reform should work to remove economic incentives for the exploitation of immigrant labor and strengthen requirements to fairly consider hiring native-born workers. Permanent status must be favored over temporary status, and families must be valued and allowed to remain intact. Components of legislation must include:

- A realistic pathway to legalization and citizenship for undocumented workers.
- Adequate funding and enforcement of all U.S. labor laws, including wage and hour laws, health and safety laws and protection of workers' right to freely organize a union.
- A system that values families and favors the unification of family members.
- An end to guest worker programs, unless guest workers are afforded full worker rights, including the right to leave objectionable employment and the right to organize a union, and are given a path to permanent legal status.
- An end to workplace immigration raids which terrorize entire communities, are rife with racial profiling and tear apart families.
- A halt to the use of the Social Security Administration in the enforcement of immigration law. The Department of Homeland Security has tried to enact new rules for when SSA discovers a social security number doesn't match information in its files—known as “No Match”. These new rules, currently blocked in federal court, would create massive firings and discrimination against those who appear to be foreign born.
- An overhaul of U.S. trade policies, which have led to the impoverishment of working people in countries throughout the world, the deindustrialization and bleeding of jobs from North America, and the push to leave one's country and migrate in search of survival wages and conditions in the U.S.

For You Were Once a Stranger analyzes the legislative efforts in Congress, but currently ends in 2006 (see **Section 3, Unraveling the National Debate 2: The Solution (13-16)**). In 2007, Congress and the President offered what was called the “Grand Compromise” an attempt at a comprehensive immigration reform package that might muster bi-partisan support. Immigrant rights advocates, including many religious groups, unions and other supporters of workers were divided on whether to support the bill as proposed, amended and debated in the US Senate in May-June, 2007. Some felt that this might be the last best chance to achieve a legalization program, however cumbersome, for undocumented workers and some guest agricultural workers. Problems that caused concern to Interfaith Worker Justice and other advocates include:

The plan for providing a path to legalization and citizenship was punitive and unrealistic. Undocumented families would have to pay a fine of up to \$10,000, a very high burden for low-wage workers.

The proposal undermined the nation’s commitment to families. The current system that favors family immigration would be replaced by a system of points that favors people with higher levels of skills, education or money.

The large proposed guest worker program had inadequate worker protections and no path to permanent residence status.

Border security was given priority over a path to citizenship and family unification. Any positive measures (path to legalization, etc.) would only be “triggered” after the U.S. Department of Homeland Security declared that the U.S.-Mexican border was secure.

The bill eventually died in the Senate, where 60 votes were needed for cloture--to shut-off debate. The cloture motion on June 28 was rejected by a vote of 46-53. Only 12 Republicans voted for cloture, which would have allowed a vote on a bill supported by the President, following a huge lobbying effort by right wing groups that viewed the bill as “amnesty” since it allowed for the legalization of some undocumented people. While the Democratic leadership was supporting the bill, 15 Democrats voted against cloture.

IWJ hopes that future attempts at reform include the basic principles for comprehensive immigration listed above, as the outgrowth of core religious principles coupled with pragmatic public policy.

The Bush Administration Initiates Immigration Law Enforcement “En Masse”— Individual Rights Are Trampled

Immigration Raids

There has been a dramatic increase in raids by the Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agency (ICE) in 2006-2007. A *New York Times* editorial, “Stop the Raids,” (October 4, 2007) brings attention to an immigrant enforcement system that terrorizes communities and families while doing nothing to increase public safety. Increasingly, agents of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agency (ICE) are undertaking mass search and seize operations at workplaces, community malls, and private homes, supposedly looking for individual gang members or people suspected of crimes. In Nassau County, Long Island the agents came in the middle of the night, some actually wearing cowboy hats, invading homes of citizens, legal residents and immigrants with no criminal record, while pointing automatic weapons and spreading terror. ICE agents even pointed their weapons at Nassau County law enforcement officers, and public officials in Nassau County vowed to stop cooperating with ICE.

In December, 2006, ICE raided six Swift meat packing plants and arrested hundreds of workers on the day of Our Lady of Guadalupe, a religious holiday of enormous significance for most Latin American immigrants. Everyone was rounded up and hundreds were detained and separated from their families in the days before Christmas. The United Food and Commercial Workers, which represents these workers, held a rally against ICE raids in Chicago in September and announced a lawsuit against ICE for

trampling on individual rights in these raids. Around a dozen Swift workers testified, including several African American citizens held on suspicion of not having proper papers. All shared stories of violations and terror, including women who were body searched by male agents. One woman testified that as she came off the killing floor, she went into a room with dozens of agents pointing weapons at her, and thought the plant had been taken over by terrorists.

Information on ICE raids are available in *For You Were Once a Stranger*:

- 1. Section 1, Introduction (1)**
- 2. Resource Section D, U.S. Immigration and Customs Agency: Deportations and Raids (54-56)**

No Match Letters

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) will force the Social Security Administration (SSA) to become part of immigration law enforcement efforts, if new rules withstand a court challenge. The function of the SSA—helping people access social security benefits—would be completely perverted.

Under the new rule, many U.S. citizens and legal resident workers will be terminated if their erroneous SSA records are not fixed within 90 days of an SSA "no-match" letter being sent to an employer. The letters indicate that a social security number does not match with other information. Misspellings, name changes after marriage, and a host of other reasons make No Match letters unsuitable in determining whether a worker is legally eligible for employment. But the rule would penalize employers who do not fire a worker after 90 days. Many employers may choose to fire workers as soon as they receive the letter, and massive firings could be the result. In addition, employers may use No Match letters as a tool to get rid of workers who support union organizing drives.

“It is the clear religious and moral imperative that we treat the stranger among us with dignity and respect,” said Kim Bobo, executive director of Interfaith Worker Justice. “But these new rules on No Match letters will lead to widespread discrimination against anyone who looks foreign and will inevitably cause large numbers of firings of all workers, including native-born American citizens and legal residents.”

Detention Centers and the Privatized Prison Industry

According to DHS, the number of “illegal immigrants” in detention has risen from 19,718 per year in 2005 to approximately 32,000 in the summer of 2007. New facilities are sprouting up. Some are run by ICE, but in a trend seen throughout the prison industry, some private companies, as well as local governments, have been given contracts to manage detention centers.

Once center drew particular scrutiny: Tent City in Raymondville, Texas.



About one hour from the Mexican border and “ringed by barbed wire, a futuristic tent city rises from the Rio Grande Valley in the remote southern tip of Texas, the largest camp in a federal detention system rapidly gearing up to keep pace with Washington's increasing demand for stronger enforcement of immigration laws” (Spencer S. Hsu and Sylvia Moreno, “Border Policy’s Success Strains Resources,” *Washington Post*, February 2, 2007). Some 2,000 detainees are held in ten massive tents, each holding 200 people in a co-gendered facility. Advocates for the detainees and the detainees themselves note that the prisoners are confined 23 hours a day in the windowless tents. Most have been transferred from the east coast, cutting off any access they may have had to family or lawyers.

Tent City, formerly known as the Willacy County Processing Center, is managed by Management and Training Corporation (MTC). The company describes itself on its website as “an international organization dedicated to helping people realize their learning potential. MTC creates nurturing environments in which education is encouraged and recognized. Self-respect, skill development and confidence all emerge from those who participate in MTC's educational opportunities to improve their quality of life. MTC provides life-changing opportunities through academic, career and technical training, and social skills training.” But it has also been offering “privatized corrections” for 20 years. Tent City was constructed in 90 days. “The fast-track work order came after President Bush provided Congress with his proposed FY2007 budget. In that 28% growth in illegal immigrant bed space for ICE. The architecture, designed for speed of construction is the first of its kind for ICE. The project includes 10 pod-like domes, each housing 200 detainees.”

The administration has put a premium on increasing detention capacity, and as in other prison ventures, is interested in controlling costs and rewarding private business ventures. Meanwhile, detainees can languish for weeks or months waiting for release or deportation. DHS has no binding standards for conditions of confinement in detention

centers, as reported in a study by National Immigrant Law Center and the American civil Liberties Union. Without standards, there can be no accountability and little effective oversight.

Taking Action

For You Were Once a Stranger provides many ways for you and your congregation to step forward and pursue justice.

Chapter 9, Faith in Action (38-41) includes information you can use to

- Organize community forums
- Join an Interfaith Worker Justice roundtable conversation
- Take the sanctuary pledge
- Become a sanctuary congregation
- Organize an interfaith prayer vigil
- Build interfaith coalitions
- Initiate a letter writing campaign
- Organize delegations to elected officials
- Build volunteer public policy committees
- Join or Form an Interfaith Worker Justice Affiliate

The resource section also includes several in depth action guides:

Resource Section E, Understanding the Legislative Process (57-60)

Resource Section F, Organizing a Community Dialogue Session (61-62)

Chapter 8, Sanctuary—Communities and Congregations Stand Tall (34-37), includes the sanctuary pledge (36)