

BECOMING WELCOMING COMMUNITIES

Immigration in Light of Biblical Faith:
A Study Guide for Wisconsin Congregations



WISCONSIN COUNCIL
OF CHURCHES
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Becoming Welcoming Communities - Wisconsin Council of Churches- Session 2, Handout 2B

20th-Century Immigration Patterns in Wisconsin

From the late nineteenth century through the end of World War II, immigration policy in the United States underwent dramatic changes that helped to alter both the pace and the face of immigration. High rates of immigration in the nineteenth century sparked nativist sentiment and encouraged the introduction of restrictive legislation, particularly toward immigrants from Asia. Two World Wars and the Depression only intensified nativist and anti-immigration forces, as numerous bills in Congress advocated the suspension of immigration due to high unemployment, and even the deportation of non-Americans who experienced financial difficulties. Deportation became a particularly common theme after the Russian Revolution when fears of communism caused some to advocate for the removal of people with subversive political beliefs.

A rapidly industrializing economy brought a new wave of immigrants to the United States at the turn of the twentieth century. As was the case for the rest of the nation, European immigrants to Wisconsin in the early twentieth century came from the east and the south; rather than the Irish, Norwegians, and Germans of the mid-to-late nineteenth century, Poles, Russians, and Italians came to live in Wisconsin. Czechs were some of the earliest eastern Europeans to come to Wisconsin, settling along Lake Michigan and in the north where they often worked in the lumber industry or established small farms in the cutover. Russians and Slovaks came later and were more urban, settling primarily in Milwaukee, Kenosha, and Racine, where they worked as industrial laborers. While many Russians arrived in the 1890s, a large number also came in the 1940s, along with a number of Holocaust survivors, seeking political asylum. The fall of communism in the Soviet Union in 1989 allowed thousands of eastern Europeans, particularly Russian Jews, to leave their homelands for the first time in over sixty years.

After Germans, Poles are the largest ethnic group in Wisconsin but they did not begin immigrating in large numbers until the 20th century, pushed by political oppression and poverty at home. The first major Polish settlement in Wisconsin (and one of the earliest in the United States) was Polonia in Portage County, though over half of all later immigrants settled in Milwaukee, working as unskilled laborers.

Prior to 1900, few Italians and Greeks lived in Wisconsin, but economic hardships in the early decades of the twentieth century led many to seek a better life in Wisconsin. Settling primarily in the industrial southeast, many Greek and Italian immigrants came intending to stay only long enough to earn money to purchase land back home. In the end, most stayed, establishing distinct ethnic neighborhoods in cities throughout southern Wisconsin, such as the Greenbush neighborhood in Madison.

Although Hispanic Americans have been in Wisconsin since before statehood, they did not become a sizable population until the 1950s. Prior to the 1950s, most Mexicans in Wisconsin were migrant laborers recruited by manufacturers and agricultural contractors to fill labor shortages caused by immigration laws that restricted the number of Europeans allowed to immigrate, as well as shortages caused by labor strikes. By 1925, around 9,000 Mexican Americans lived in Milwaukee but most lost their jobs during the Depression and moved back home.

The increased demand for food and simultaneous shortage of labor during World War II created a demand for agricultural workers. The Emergency Farm Labor Program, adopted in 1943, permitted employers to hire foreign workers to work in the fields. Under this program, Wisconsin growers imported male workers from Jamaica, the Bahamas, British Honduras, and Mexico. Over 13,000 German prisoners of war were also used in the fields, working out of 38 camps throughout Wisconsin from 1944 to 1945. After the war, the importation of Mexicans continued, supported by the federal Bracero program that brought millions of Mexican farm laborers north until the program was discontinued in 1964.

Today, Mexicans are the largest Spanish-speaking group in Wisconsin, almost all in the southeast corner of the state. Mexicans arriving in the 1950s and after have found an established community of Mexican Americans to settle into, particularly in Milwaukee. Another fast-growing group of Spanish-speakers is Puerto Ricans who began arriving in Wisconsin in the late 1940s drawn to industrial jobs in Milwaukee, Kenosha, and Racine counties. Wisconsin is also home to political refugees and other immigrants from Cuba, El Salvador, Colombia, and Nicaragua.

New arrivals also came from other regions of the United States. Between 1940 and 1960, Wisconsin's African-American population increased by nearly 600 percent, from 12,158 to 74,546. Drawn to jobs in industrial cities during and after World War II, many African Americans from the South stayed to raise their families, but still encountered widespread racial discrimination, and segregation in the North.

Wisconsin received little Asian immigration in the nineteenth century. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, The United States eliminated direct immigration from China (1882), India (1917), Japan (1924), and the Philippines (1934). During World War II, some Japanese, many of whom were American citizens, were interned at Camp McCoy. The 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act removed restrictions based on national origins in favor of a preference system that gave priority to family reunification and political refugees. Most Asian immigration to Wisconsin has occurred in recent decades, particularly among Hmong refugees from Laos.

Recruited during the Vietnam War as guerilla soldiers to fight the North Vietnamese, Hmong peoples were living literally in the crossfire during the conflict. When the United States withdrew from Vietnam in 1975, the Hmong who had aided the United States were left in the hands of the communists they had fought against. Thousands fled to refugee camps in Thailand where resettlement organizations, such as the US Catholic Conference and Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services, helped to sponsor Hmong immigration to the United States beginning in 1975. Wisconsin has the third largest Hmong population in the country, after Minnesota and California. The largest communities in Wisconsin are in La Crosse, Sheboygan, Green Bay, Wausau, and Milwaukee.

In the latter half of the 20th century, more people from Mexico, Central and South America, the Caribbean, and East Asia have come to Wisconsin, bringing new cultures and traditions to the state. US involvement abroad has helped to form links between Wisconsin residents and people in other nations which has brought immigrants from all parts of the world. Federal immigration laws have come to favor people from countries that have not sent large numbers of people in the past in order to ensure cultural diversity.

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