

BECOMING WELCOMING COMMUNITIES

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



WISCONSIN COUNCIL
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My Immigration Story

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My immigration story may not appear to be a common one; however, my struggles are shared by others who were not born in this country, those who came here with or without the appropriate immigration documentation. Some of these difficulties are not our own fault or responsibility, but the direct result of an unfair system. Although our situation was not easy, it was better than other immigrants'.

I am from El Salvador where I was a rural medical doctor. I came to the United States for a better life for myself and my family, and to keep my son safe from gang violence. My son and I had the blessing of being sponsored by my son's godparents so I could get a student visa. Besides that, they gave us board and room and transportation. The whole process to get the F1 student visa took about 10 months. This included: quitting the job I'd had for 8 years with the public health department; leaving my mother behind; getting all the required documentation and validations; and proving that I was wealthy enough to have at least \$52,000 in a bank account or in property. Obviously, I did not have that amount of money and my host family had to state that they were going to cover all the costs of my education (tuition and fees). Later, these expenses were actually covered by the generosity of my church and other donors.

When my five-year-old son and I arrived, we were full of hope and dreams. At that time, we did not think of it as immigrating, just as my getting a degree that would allow me to have a better income back in El Salvador. However, everything changed when my 79-year-old mom was attacked and died a few days later in El Salvador. We never knew what actually happened to her – if it was common violence or a targeted murder. I had lost all my family in El Salvador and our community was not safe for my son and me anymore.

It has not been easy. This is a wonderful country with a lot of opportunities, but people like me who are not white always face racism in all its layers and forms. For example, I went to visit a friend of mine, who is white, blue eyed, and blonde, and went with her to do grocery shopping. She was using a grocery bag to put her stuff instead of a cart. When I tried to do the same at Woodman's in Altoona, I was stopped by a manager after I paid, who said she needed to check my bag "just to be sure..."

Everywhere I go, I am usually the recipient of dirty looks and unfriendly attitudes, or ignored, but everything changes when I am with a white person. I was once asked if I was a citizen of this country when I had my

picture taken in order to renew my driver's license. Another time, I was accused by a white guy, in a church setting, that I was looking for microaggressions like these to happen to me. As Christians, there is a lot to do to change the way we talk about race – for example, the tendency to say that white people are “victims” of “reverse racism,” or the excuses for racism so commonly made by white people.

After I got a bachelor's degree, I went to Luther Seminary where I discerned my call and started Neighbor to Neighbor Ministry, which aims to build bridges of understanding between the Lutheran churches and Hispanic communities in the northwest of Wisconsin. It was during this time that my F1 visa expired and I started the steps to get a new type of visa, an R1 religious worker visa. The process took 13 months, a lot of paperwork, and proof that I had an employer who was willing to sponsor my new immigration status. It is important to mention that anyone renewing a visa is not allowed to have any type of income while they are waiting for an approval. In my case, I was not even allowed to volunteer in my own Ministry. It took around 200 congregations – the whole synod – to enable my two sons (11 and 2 years old) and me to survive these long 13 months. They supported us in many ways.

When my new visa was finally approved, I could restart my ministry. The experience gave me, and those around us, a different perspective of all that the immigration process entails. It is understandable how many immigrants “decide” to go against the rules because it is the only way to survive. How are we supposed to have a basic, decent life when we are not allowed to have any income? How is anybody supposed to feed their children and cover their basic needs? It is very obvious that the system will push some to do what the system tells you not to do.

Some people, when they see Hispanic persons, tend to think that we are “illegal immigrants.” However, the reality is that not all of us are “illegal” and not all of us are immigrants. (Just remember, there are also *white* immigrants that are illegal!) The stigma of being an immigrant is that no matter how long we have been in this country, we will always be considered to be immigrants, even by those working for “immigrants' rights.” The problem is not being called an immigrant, but being one means being seen as someone who came here, not as a member of a community, a neighbor (something that doesn't happen to white persons).

Visit the website of Neighbor to Neighbor Ministry: <https://nswi.org/neighbor-to-neighbor>