

BECOMING WELCOMING COMMUNITIES

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



WISCONSIN COUNCIL
OF CHURCHES
COURAGE. JUSTICE. HOLY IMAGINATION.

Becoming Welcoming Communities - Wisconsin Council of Churches- Session 5, Handout 5H

Interview with Pastor Adam Clausen

Edited for length and clarity:

How do you help immigrants and the community within your church and area?

We have a French speaking Francophone African fellowship, pastored by an African French speaking African immigrant, a female pastor, which is also unique in that culture. Most of those members are from West Africa, with some from France or central Africa. There are between 50 and 70 French-speaking African families, and I believe all of the adults over 30 are first-generation immigrants. Many of them have been in the process of getting citizenship or green cards. So, we hear their stories and advocate for them, sharing the privilege and access to resources that we can: connecting them with legal immigration services, advocating for immigration reform, and helping our faith community and other faith communities to be more aware of the immigrant experience here.

We also have Latino members who are immigrants and have their citizenship or are going through the process themselves, but that's a smaller contingent. And we have a partnership with the Hmong Institute, which operates Monday through Friday out of our space. They offer social and mental health services to the Hmong community and especially the Hmong elders who have had to go through a tremendous amount of trauma, both abroad and here. The Hmong narrative and experience of having their own place is really important, having never had their own sovereign land in other countries. For us to be able to provide a space for them, where they can access therapy and have all these other social and mental health services is another way we're serving.

We have not wanted to be just a multiethnic Church, but a multicultural one, and not just allow but prioritize the influence of other voices and expressions of faith identities and cultural identities. My faith is expressed through who we are, both uniquely and collectively. We have joint services twice a month that are translated, with an integrated praise team. It is bilingual in French and English, including songs belonging to their African culture translated into English, and songs belonging to American culture that are translated into French. The Hmong members who come have been integrated into the praise team and teaching team as well, so there are some sermons given by a Hmong preacher. By being non-denominational, we can avoid some of the church politics that denominations have, and just allow diverse thoughts and perspectives on Scripture through testimonies and shared experiences of God and faith.

Do you provide food, housing or other necessities to new immigrants?

Yes, rental assistance, utility bills, helping with broken down appliances, furnishings, different child support needs, childcare needs, and navigating educational systems and spaces. We do have a small benevolence that is historically and presently for people outside of our Church. We wanted it to be for the community, but we have used it for some immigrant members of our fellowship in the past. Over the last year and a half, the needs of our immigrant community within our fellowship have just been met by the generosity of our members. Because we are a small fellowship, we can connect. We know each other. We're doing life with each other. It's not a big system that we've worked out, but our family has really been a family.

Has it ever been difficult to communicate with new Church members that are immigrants ?

Not for me personally. We've always just immersed ourselves in their world and life and culture and try to learn from them, to be a part of their celebrations and way of life. The language has come from this. I walk into their life as a Christian.

With the African immigrant community, their experience is just unique, I think, in many ways suburban types of people have not been forced to think about and consider. You don't really know that until you have entered their experience. You love watching them and admiring them and their unique culture. But beyond that, you don't know them as people. You don't know their lived experience day to day, what their children are experiencing as that next generation, what their experience here in America is like. That's why all these other conversations and topics are so important for us to address as faith leaders and as a faith community.

Question for reflection:

How would you compare this church's ministry to and with immigrant communities to that of your congregation? What new approaches or practices would you like to see your congregation adopt?