



Millions of people around the world are on the move, fleeing their homes because of violence, human rights violations, and natural disasters. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimates that there will be 117.2 million displaced and stateless people in 2023. While many displaced people stay in their home countries, many others are forced to cross international borders. Like Mary and Joseph, who fled King Herod with the infant Jesus, they hope to find safety and respite from the conditions in their home communities.

In the United States, a refugee is a migrant whose humanitarian status is certified before they arrive in the U.S. An asylum seeker is an individual who seeks protection from persecution in their home country once they are on U.S. soil. Both of these statuses are defined and protected by U.S. and international law.

Despite the great need for welcome, the U.S. is often hostile to refugees and asylum seekers. Many politicians promote racist anti-immigrant sentiments. Because of hostile rhetoric, the U.S. government is enacting illegal and immoral restrictions on the right to seek asylum. From 2020 until May 11 of this year, the U.S. used pandemic-era authority under Title 42 of the U.S. Code to expel migrants arriving at the U.S.-Mexico border.

When Title 42 ended, it was replaced with an asylum transit ban. Under the ban, migrants who arrive at the U.S.-Mexico border are presumed ineligible for asylum unless they sought and were denied asylum in a country they traveled through to get to the United States. This policy forces asylum seekers to wait and seek asylum in Northern Mexico and Central America, where the conditions for them are not safe.

The Bible teaches us that we are all one in Jesus Christ. Therefore, we must choose to welcome all refugees and asylum seekers, regardless of how they arrived in the United States. We must also remember that systemic structures make finding safety more difficult for some groups than others. Women, Black migrants, indigenous migrants, and queer people face barriers and discrimination when fleeing their homes. Christians must work for just and equitable migration policy that seeks to welcome our neighbors.

We invite Presbyterians around the nation to stand in solidarity with our refugee neighbors by extending biblical hospitality through the We Choose Welcome campaign.

PCUSA REFUGEE & IMMIGRATION PRIORITIES FOR 2023:

1. Repeal restrictions on asylum and oppose policies that seek to expand and/or codify them.
2. Meet President Biden's goal to welcome 125,000 refugees in FY2023.
3. Grant permanent status to refugees who entered the United States via humanitarian parole, such as Afghans, Ukrainians, Cubans, and Venezuelans. This status is limited to countries the president designates and is only temporary.
4. Pass the Afghan Adjustment Act, so that Afghans who were evacuated to the U.S. can have permanent status.
5. Enact a pathway to citizenship for the 11 million undocumented immigrants currently living in the United States.

PC(USA) Statements About Refugees, Asylum and Immigration

The PC(USA) has been explicit about our moral obligation to advocate for the entry and integration of refugees in our country and to resist any form of discrimination or exclusion. Here are a few examples of recent statements:

Statement of Patriarchs and Heads of Churches on the increasing cycle of violence in the Holy Land (Jan. 29, 2023)

<https://www.lpj.org/posts/statement-on-the-increasing-cycle-of-violence-in-the-holy-land.html>

PC(USA) celebrates court decision to block 'Death to Asylum' Trump rule.

<https://www.pcusa.org/news/2021/1/13/pcusa-celebrates-court-decision-to-block-death-to/>

PCUSA signs Ecumenical Declaration to Expand Welcome (2021)

https://cwsglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/March-2021_Ecumenical-Declaration_Expand-Welcome_with-current-Signatures_5March-26COB-2-1.pdf

PCUSA General Assembly adopts resolution: On Responding to Our Sisters and Brothers Who Are Refugees or Internally Displaced (2016)

https://pda.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/pda/pdfs/0906_on_refugees.pdf

PC(USA) General Assembly Resolution: On Declaring the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to Be a Sanctuary and Accompaniment Church (2022)

<https://www.pc-biz.org/#/search/3000862>

You can find the history of PCUSA policy on refugees and immigration at the OGA Immigration Issues Office webpage.

<https://oga.pcusa.org/section/mid-council-ministries/immigration/advocacy/>

10 Ways Your Congregation Can Choose Welcome



INVITE AN IMMIGRANT OR REFUGEE-LED ORGANIZATION TO SPEAK

Refugees' and asylum seekers' voices are often shut out of the media. Immigrant-led groups can recommend speakers who are well-equipped to share refugee experiences and their community's needs.



ADVOCATE FOR GOOD POLICY

In recognition of the sacrifice, resilience, and contributions of refugees, tell your Members of Congress to invest in the U.S. capacity to welcome. We need to rebuild and strengthen the refugee resettlement program and work to restore asylum protections. Ask the Administration and Congress to show moral leadership and welcome people fleeing violence and persecution.



OFFER YOUR RESOURCES

Small grassroots organizations led by refugees face resource constraints. Offer them a place to meet, help with refreshments, office supplies or other meeting expenses. You can help in socially-distant ways too: with publicity, collecting or transporting goods. Introduce refugee organizations to other community leaders to help them build a network of supporters.



USE MEDIA TO AMPLIFY

A shift in the way the media portrays refugees is necessary to make refugees feel fully welcome. Instead of a narrative rooted in fear of "the other," we must highlight a narrative rooted in peace and love. The positive community contributions by refugees are often overlooked. Help shape the narrative by submitting op-eds to the local paper, promoting local refugee-led organizations and events, and utilizing social media to let people know where you stand, as a Presbyterian and as a community member.



HOST A MULTI-FAITH VIGIL OR SERVICE

Refugees come from all religious backgrounds and all major faiths share a common call to welcoming the stranger. Interfaith worship offers a space to foster mutual understanding between people of different faith traditions. Worship together on a religious holiday. Host an interfaith vigil (in-person or online) in solidarity with refugees to bring people together and show public support.



SUPPORT REFUGEES IN DISMANTLING RACISM

Building welcoming, safe and equitable communities in the U.S. is ongoing. People of color who are refugees and immigrants also need our support for racial justice. Ask local refugee groups how you can become an ally for their full inclusion. The PCUSA Peacemaking guide can deepen your understanding of the intersection of race and immigration.



ORGANIZE A REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT WELCOME TEAM

Resettling to the U.S. is a resource-intensive process. Welcome refugees with financial, emotional and physical support. As our country rebuilds the resettlement program, your church can help the community to prepare welcome. Contact your local refugee resettlement agency or pda@pcusa.org for more information.



HOST A COMMUNITY EDUCATION EVENT

Many people have misconceptions about refugees, their countries and the circumstances that forced them to leave. Host a film screening & discussion, invite a panel of refugees and volunteers in partnership with other community organizations.



ACCOMPANY AN ASYLUM SEEKER

Individuals seeking asylum or facing deportation because of a lack of immigration solutions need physical, financial, emotional and spiritual support. Form an "accompaniment team" to provide housing, food, access to legal services and more. Your actions can provide comfort and courage to those fighting for their lives in a complex court process and even make a difference in their court outcomes.



HAVE FUN

Not everything about welcoming newcomers has to be serious business. Having fun and laughing together can also build connections and can help refugees and asylum seekers to thrive. Invite refugees to participate in a sports event, attend a concert or community fair. Celebrate milestones in their lives or the life of the church together.

Frequently Asked Questions

WHAT IS A REFUGEE?

Refugees and asylees are people who have fled their country of origin as a result of persecution—or fear of persecution—based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group. Refugees and asylees are differentiated by where they apply. Refugees apply to the U.S. Government overseas where they go through an intensive interview and background process. They enter the U.S. after approval, through resettlement. Asylees first make it to the U.S., they apply after arrival and begin the screening process. Both are legal pathways to seek refuge in the U.S.

WHAT RIGHTS ARE GUARANTEED TO REFUGEES AND ASYLEES?

Refugees and asylees both have the right to work, go to school, apply for a social security card, petition to bring their immediate family members. After one year they can apply for a “Green Card” (lawful permanent residence) and apply for citizenship after 5 years. They do not have the same access to public assistance as U.S. Citizens, but are eligible for specialized services and support.

WHY SHOULD WE LET REFUGEES INTO OUR COUNTRY?

As Christians, we have the moral obligation to welcome the stranger, particularly those fleeing persecution. It is also part of U.S. and international law. Thousands of Jewish children perished in the Holocaust because the U.S. denied them entry. This is a humanitarian tragedy that should not be repeated. Welcoming refugees also serves our own national interest. Large influxes of refugees into neighboring countries can lead to further unrest. Resettling refugees can be part of a larger strategic plan for recovery. Refugees also bolster local economies by bringing labor and expertise.

WHAT ARE “CLIMATE REFUGEES?”

While not recognized as legal criteria for refugee recognition, climate change is certainly a significant factor or root cause of forced displacement today. The effects of climate change are threatening vulnerable populations across the world. Changes to climate have led to food and water insecurity, and island nations are particularly vulnerable to rising sea levels. People displaced by climate change, however, often go without the legal protections offered to refugees. The US Government is studying what they can do.

WHY ARE SO MANY REFUGEES COMING FROM CENTRAL AMERICA?

The Northern Triangle of Central America (NTAC), consisting of El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, is one of the most violent regions in the world. According to a Doctors Without Borders survey, many people cited blackmail, extortion, gang violence, and

threats to their lives as reasons for leaving their homes. As a direct result of this incredible danger, neighboring countries have seen a 432% increase in asylum applications.

As of March 2020, the CDC ordered a restriction on border crossings to control the spread of COVID-19, banning all entry without documentation. This order has effectively ended asylum for all new arrivals, regardless of country of origin or exposure to COVID-19. With court dates delayed due to the virus, an estimated 64,000 asylum seekers are waiting in limbo at the U.S.-Mexico border. This overcrowding not only leaves asylum seekers vulnerable to the very violence they are trying to escape, but more vulnerable to COVID-19, as social distancing in crowded encampments is nearly impossible.

WHY ARE THERE SO MANY UNACCOMPANIED MINORS?

The number of children arriving alone has increased dramatically in 2023. Some of the increase is due to parents sending their children across the border alone in response to US policies that separate families or expel them. An unaccompanied minor from countries other than Mexico typically has more time to make an asylum claim in the U.S. than adults of the same nationality and similar circumstances. Once the children are detained, they are referred to the Office of Refugee Resettlement and held in U.S. custody until they are released to a sponsor or placed in foster care. A new report shows the need for stronger reception and integration services for unaccompanied children. PCUSA is one of many advocating for the end of family separation.



Resources

Refugee Resettlement FAQ

A brief overview of the refugee resettlement process in the U.S., including eligibility and how churches and support resettled refugees. <https://pda.pcusa.org/page/faq-refugee-resettlement/>

Life Inside Detention Video Series

Created by the New Sanctuary Movement of Atlanta, the videos are perfect for an education program or series. The videos address 6 different aspects of immigration detention and can be used separately or together. Educational resources and action items are also provided. <https://pda.pcusa.org/pda/resource/immigration-video-series/>

PCUSA Welcoming the Stranger webinar series

Past webinars have been recorded and are available on vimeo. <https://vimeo.com/showcase/8597927>

Future webinars will be announced through the Office of Public Witness action emails. You can sign up for the email list here: <https://www.votervoices.net/PCUSA/home>

Faith Partners Advocacy Toolkit

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Pa78nzF09zy9gaRVAc-JLAwHPc83B_KLGPnBq48fojls/edit

Tips for how to organize meeting with Elected Officials via Zoom or conference call

https://pda.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/pda/pdfs/online_visits_with_congress_tips.pdf

Preparing Welcome

A helpful guide for congregations as they navigate the period between deciding to welcome a refugee and arrival

https://pda.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/pda/pdfs/preparing_welcomeguide2020.pdf

Refugee Resettlement locations and Volunteer Opportunities

Contact PDA for help locating the nearest office, pda@pcusa.org.

The Companion Guide to the Commitment to Peacemaking

From the Presbyterian Peacemaking Program, this guide offers reading and Bible study recommendations, identifies target areas for community engagement, and tips for how a congregation can be an effective advocate for change.

<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/resource/companion-guide-to-the-commitment-to-peacemaking/>

PCUSA World Refugee Day resources (updated each Spring)

Resources include stories, tools for congregational involvement and worship resources

<https://pda.pcusa.org/page/world-refugee-day/>

Interfaith Asylum Vigil Toolkit to guide you organize your own vigil to support asylum:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1yuXsE3mBf-9VTISDw6FGjRP-g8VmcDyRcT5jO57sFq0/edit>

General guidance on organizing an interfaith vigil:

<https://www.interfaithimmigration.org/2020/09/29/how-to-host-a-prayer-vigil/>

Community Sponsorship guide and weekly webinars from Church World Service

<https://cwsglobal.org/take-action/community-sponsorship/>

Faith Over Fear trainings offered by Shoulder to Shoulder

Reduce and counter anti-Muslim bias, discrimination, and violence in the United States by working with faith and community leaders <https://www.shouldertoshouldercampaign.org/trainings>

Welcoming America

This nonprofit leads a movement of welcome by connecting nonprofits and local governments, and supports them to become truly welcoming places. Their annual Welcome Week is September 8–17, 2023.

<https://welcomingamerica.org/>

NAKASEC

Founded in 1994, the National Korean American Service & Education Consortium's (NAKASEC) mission is to organize Korean and Asian Americans to achieve social, economic, and racial justice. Resources are available in Korean and other Asian languages.

<https://nakasec.org/>

Alianza Americas

Provides resources in Spanish and English, including an excellent series of conversations about the root causes of Central American migration.

<https://www.alianzaamericas.org/>

REPORTS

Task Force Report to the President on the Climate Crisis and Global Migration: A Pathway to Protection for People on the Move. (July 2021) Prepared in May–July 2021 in response to Executive Order 14013 (February 4, 2021) on “Rebuilding and Enhancing Programs to Resettle Refugees and Planning for the Impact of Climate Change on Migration.” <https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports/2021/7/12/task-force-report-to-the-president-on-the-climate-crisis-and-global-migration-a-pathway-to-protection-for-people-on-the-move>

Strengthening Services for Unaccompanied Children (June 2021) This report by Migration Policy Institute examines the process by which unaccompanied minors are released to sponsors, federal post-release services, and services needed.

<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/services-unaccompanied-children-us-communities>

Grave Human & Civil Rights Abuses (El Salvador) A report by the Latin America Working Group on the abuses in the year since a state of emergency was declared by the Government of El Salvador.

<https://www.lawg.org/grave-human-and-civil-rights-abuses-under-el-salvadors-state-of-emergency-is-this-the-new-normal/>