

Embracing the Stranger: *Toward an Adventist Theology of Migration* | BY LOURDES E. MORALES-GUDMUNDSSON

"...when human rights are perverted in the presence of the Most High...does the Lord not see it?"

Lamentations 3:35–36 (NRSV)

In this country, the United States of America, where I was born and raised by Christian Venezuelan-Puerto Rican immigrant parents, the challenge of dealing with the immigrant, particularly the immigrant from just across the United States-Mexico border has divided American Christians into two camps: those who would associate true patriotism with resistance and even hostility toward this alien, and those Christians who belong to a longer tradition of providing "sanctuary" for these immigrants and refugees to the United States. The first group, armed with the justification of "illegality" provided by American immigration laws that no longer serve the interests either of Mexico or the United States, has made these "illegal aliens" the target of vitriolic accusations: of labor market subterfuge, undermining of American culture, and criminality. Other Christians remain either uncertain or silent in their response to such rhetoric. Yet some, determined to uphold the American Christian church's historic role of protector, try to provide for newly-arrived immigrants.

Morris Dees, founder and director of the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), a human rights watchdog organization, calls the current acrimonious debate surrounding Latino immigration a test of the American spirit. He states that the Federal Bureau of Investigation reports that hate crimes against Latinos have risen by 35% and Center investigators have recently confirmed that 946 hate groups are now active in America, more than a 60% rise in their numbers since the year 2000.¹ In Attorney Dees words, "This unprecedented growth is the result of an escalating anti-immigrant fervor that is contaminating our

nation's very soul." (Dees 2008, 3). He, as a Christian himself, goes on to make a statement that should cut to the heart of every American Christian: "While people of good will can have different opinions about our nation's immigration policy, hatred, racism, and violence should have no place in the debate" (*Ibid.*).

Where is Adventism in this conversation? There is an absence of a stated position on immigrants and immigration by the Seventh-day Adventist church. However, there are elements in the Fundamental Beliefs that could help us shape a statement in the context of what has come to be called the "theology of migration."

What is the "Theology of Migration?"

The concept of a "theology" of migration, born within the Catholic tradition and now being adopted by evangelical and mainstream Protestants as well, seeks to address issues of Christian duty specifically toward immigrants and refugees. Since this most recent stranger in our midst often falls into the category of the poor, the widow, the orphan, the slave, and the outcast; that is, those kinds of persons that Jesus cared about and cared for, Christians likewise have a biblical and moral duty toward these newcomers. That is the basic assumption of any theology of migration.

In a document issued by the Catholic bishops of the United States in November 2000 entitled "Welcoming the Stranger Among Us: Unity in Diversity," the Catholic church affirmed its historic stance with regard to the immigrant and refugee. It is the church's duty to welcome new immigrants and help them join American communities in ways that respect their cultures. They propose to do so through a tripartite program of *conversion, communion, and solidarity*.

Conversion calls for an acknowledgement of past failures and sinful patterns of chauvinism and discrimination

toward newcomers and a “profound conversion of the spirit” (*Ibid.*, 5).

Communion recognizes the need to better understand different cultures and promote intercultural communication.

Finally, *solidarity* means putting the fruits of conversion and communion into practice by meeting the newcomers on their terms in order to be truly welcoming, acting on their behalf by participating in public policy advocacy, and pushing for laws that are respectful of human rights and the dignity of the immigrant (*Ibid.*).

Migration theology, according to Ellacuría, has to confront the negative in reality in order to transform it, which explains why theologians and pastoral personnel who subscribe to this view will as often be found serving food to the hungry and water to the thirsty as preaching a sermon.

The second step requires taking responsibility for the ethical demands that grow out of that reality of migration: demands for justice, acceptance, and human dignity. When the United States claims to be a “nation of immigrants,” the migration theologian expects that there will be a sustained reflection on how that claim impinges on issues of social justice.

Thirdly, this active theology is committed to addressing whatever threatens human dignity and the rights of the immigrant as a living human being, made in the image of God.

And, finally, this theology recognizes that the migrant experience is not simply one of suffering and marginalization, but of the hope and courage these immigrants bring to the nearly insurmountable obstacles they find on their journey to the life they are entitled to live as God’s children (Campese in Hondagneu-Sotelo 2007, 179–180). For the border immigrant, those obstacles include having to make the initial decision to emigrate in order to provide a minimal life of dignity for himself and his family. It means breaking with family and with the familiar, crossing an inhospitable desert and facing the possibility of death, dealing with unpredictable and sometimes unscrupulous “coyotes” and the Border Patrol, *La Migra*, and its detention centers, once on the other side. With the closing of the usual routes across the border, immigrants find themselves facing the dangers of more challenging routes through the desert: rattlesnakes, hunger and thirst, the implacable desert heat, suffocation in train cars and vans.

Other Voices for the Immigrant

Thus it is that church groups as well as interfaith coalitions and secular organizations based in the United States, convinced that both the church and the state have failed bor-

der immigrants, have offered “shelters, shrines, know-your-rights booklets, water stations, and blessings” (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2007, 13) to migrants in danger of dying from hypothermia and dehydration. “While state regulations create an increasingly dangerous landscape, religion steps in to minimize risk, danger, and social injustice” (*Ibid.*, 13). On the United States side of the border, those involved in immigrant rights are not limited to mainline Christian churches. Muslims and Buddhists as well as nonreligious community and interfaith religious groups such as Interfaith Coalition for Immigrant Rights, and Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice regularly work to address what they perceive to be injustices aimed at those least able to defend themselves.

Most recently, the bishops of the United Methodist Church committed to advocate for comprehensive immigration reform that is humane and effective and that upholds the human and civil rights of immigrants” (“Global Ministries,” May). Specifically, these bishops support providing a pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants currently living in the United States and want an immigration system that reunifies immigrant families separated due to workplace raids.

To be sure, an increasing number of American Christian individuals and organizations are engaged in faith-inspired volunteerism to aid Latino immigrants before and after they cross the United States-Mexico border. For example, the *Casa del Migrante* (www.migrante.com.mx/Tijuana.htm) in Tijuana is a shelter for men who have been deported. Humane Borders,² a coalition of Christian individuals and churches, based in Arizona, states on their website that their work of providing more than eighty water stations along the United States-Mexico border, on both sides, is a humanitarian labor “motivated by faith,” (www.humaneborders.org) intended to save lives and invite public discourse.

The New Sanctuary Movement is creating much debate surrounding the tensions between the dictates of law and those of the individual conscience. Influenced by the older Sanctuary Movement that grew out of the influx of refugees from Central America in the 1980s, the newer movement seeks to protect immigrants from unjust deportation by sheltering them in churches where government officials, to date, have been reluctant to trespass to make arrests (Levitske 2007, 1).

Tucson-based BorderLinks (www.borderlinks.org), created in 1987 with origins in the Sanctuary Movement, is a

bi-national organization with facilities on both sides of the border. Its board of directors includes faculty from different universities and community leaders. Their mission is to provide educational resources and raise awareness among United States citizens about the socio-economic and religious realities of the border and the effects United States policies have on Mexico and Central America.

What is interesting are the teachings and motivations that inform the work of these Christian groups and individuals. Some are inspired by the Liberation Theology of Gustavo Gutiérrez, the writings of Paulo Freire, Quaker and Mennonite teachings on non-violence, or the principles of social justice deriving from the Christian faith (duty to the poor and marginalized). Others simply say, “God sent me here” (*Ibid.*, 119–120). It is common for those engaged in immigrant work to say that they see in the immigrant the personification of Christ. That is, they believe that serving this community is a form of serving Christ who was a kind of undocumented alien who took up the cause of the poor and oppressed (*Ibid.*, 119). This identification of the immigrant with “the lowly Jesus” is linked to the notion that immigrants have the right to emigrate and that, often, the decision to emigrate is not purely individual, but influenced by broader structural forces. As Ufford-Chase puts it:

*The most successful way to resolve our border and immigration crisis is to create economic opportunities that will allow people to stay in their countries of origin. But that will never be accomplished with a trade policy that regards smaller nations as nothing more than a cheap labor supply. It is not morally defensible to create a global economy without accepting the responsibility of building a global community (*Ibid.*, 119; emphasis mine).*

It is common for these organizations and individuals to believe that the Christian faith cannot be limited to private spirituality and corporate worship. It must engage in the socio-political life of the nation as it impinges on the poor. The reasons for engaging in immigrant work may vary depending on the Christian denomination, but “they do similar work, engage in similar ways of organizing, oppose violent structures, and dedicate their lives to pursuing justice and creating a just society” (Menjívar 120).³

In recent years, voices have been raised against the historic role of the Christian church as protector of, or provider for, the newcomer. In fact, in very recent history, efforts

have been made to criminalize the work of the church for undocumented Latino immigrants. For example, at the beginning of 2006, Congress attempted to pass a bill (HR 4437) making it a federal crime to offer assistance or services to undocumented immigrants. In response, Bishop Gerald R. Barnes, speaking for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, warned that such a law would place churches and their outreach social programs at risk of criminal prosecution for doing what they always have done. Not only did church leaders speak out against such legislation, faith-based and secular groups organized and mobilized the largest immigration rights marches ever seen in the United States in Dallas and Los Angeles, as well as in most major cities. The largest one was held on April 10, 2006, the National Day of Action for Immigrant Social Justice with marches and rallies in over sixty cities across the country.

Christians for Comprehensive Immigration Reform (CCIR) is yet another coalition of Christian churches (largely evangelical) that supports immigration reform. Recently, under the leadership of Sojourners’ Reverend Jim Wallis, it made a statement of principles endorsed by twenty-seven national religious organizations and forty leaders. It proposed five guiding principles (*SojoMail*):

- Enforcement initiatives that are consistent with humanitarian values
- Reforms in our family-based immigration system that reduce waiting times for separated families to be reunited
- A process for all immigrant workers and their families already in the United States to earn citizenship upon satisfaction of specific criteria
- An expansion of legal avenues for workers and families to enter our country and work in a safe and legal manner with their rights and due process fully protected
- Examining solutions to address the root causes of migration, such as economic disparities between sending and receiving nations.

Ellen White and the “Foreigner”

The absence of any specific statement on the Adventist church’s position on immigrants and immigration should not lead us to conclude that there is no interest in this topic or that the founders had nothing to say about the topic. Ellen White, for one, had quite a bit to say about the way in which Adventist were to treat the “foreigner.” It was her belief that Christ died for the immigrant (6T. 274)⁴ and that church members were to be “rivers of living water” for

the stranger. She complained that, “instead of imparting the gifts of God, many who profess to be Christians are wrapped up in their own narrow interests, and they selfishly withhold God’s blessings from their fellow men.” (6T. 274). She goes on to define what those “gifts of God” might be: “In the professed Christian world there is enough expended in extravagant display to supply the wants of all the hungry and to clothe the naked” (6T. 274). Those who bore the name of Christ were gratifying the appetite and pride while “to suffering human beings they give scarcely a look of pity or a word of sympathy” (6T. 275). The following paragraph of this same passage describes the misery of the typical late nineteenth-century inner city where immigrants and the native poor lived in squalor. She calls on the church to do a long-neglected work, not only donating money to address the afflictions of the stranger and the poor, but getting off the “stilts of your dignity and superiority” (6T. 277) to personally get involved in their lives.

By the time she finishes this chapter, it’s easy to forget that the poor to whom she is referring are, in fact, in large part, foreigners seeking a new life and finding themselves in deplorable conditions. She makes a radical call to Adventist Christians: Your benevolence is not enough; you need to visit these people and show them God’s mercy and compassion. In fact, immigrants from around the globe were destined to come to America to hear the truth (Ch. S. 200)⁵ and take that truth to their kinfolk and neighbors. Church members, as she saw it, were to be the conduits of that “truth” by being present to the newcomer. Her vision seems to be that the immigrant should return to their countries and share their faith as well as do so in their communities in the United States. She saw outreach to these newcomers as a “duty” of the Adventist church (8T. 36; Ev. 570–571).⁶

In general, her concern was that these communities be evangelized (Ch. S. 200–201; 8T. 35, Ev. 569–573), but she was also concerned with the treatment of these immigrants. She reminded Adventists, as members of the “New Israel,” that, like ancient Israel, they are to treat the alien with kindness and love them as ones for whom Christ died (6T. 274). And she goes beyond mere kindness in Adventist dealings with those from other countries and cultures; Adventists were to provide for the newcomer. She again gives the example of ancient Israel who was instructed to leave a portion for the stranger at harvest time (6T. 274). It was not enough to show kindness with the intent of

proselytizing; she understood that there was a biblical mandate to show kindness as well as to provide for the needs of the stranger. She even went so far as to suggest that, like ancient Israel, Adventists were to include the stranger in their “feasts” (6T. 274),⁷ which explains her opposition to churches and conferences separated by language and culture (See 9T. 195 where she objects to a separate German conference, for example).⁸ In this sense, she envisioned a truly united and inclusive Adventism.

Toward an Adventist Theology of Migration

It seems clear that there are mandates both from the Bible and Ellen White that could serve as a basis for an Adventist theological conversation about immigrants, one that might result in a re-examination of the relationship between peoples of other languages and cultures and native-born Americans, to begin with, and then in an official statement that would open the way for continued explorations relating to issues of justice and mercy toward those among us newly arrived from other cultures and language groups, particularly those bringing unskilled but willing hands to work.

The following are some suggested elements of an Adventist theology of migration that build on some of the most fundamental Adventist beliefs:

1. **The character of God:** Fundamental Belief (hereafter referred to as F.B.) #3 defines the character of God as Father: Creator, Source, Sustainer, and Sovereign of all creation. He is just and holy, merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. In the following and related F.B. #4 about the “Son,” it is declared that the Son of God is the incarnate revelation of the loving and compassionate character of the eternal Father. It is this divine presence in all humans that endows each one with certain inalienable rights that we call “human rights.”
2. **The “*imago dei*” of every human being:** F.B. #7 states that “man and woman were made in the image of God with individuality, the power and freedom to think and to do.” In a theology of migration, the “*imago dei*” implies that each person not only has inherent rights to freedom of expression and thought as well as to the exercise of a free will, but merits compassion, justice, and respect. The image of God is no respecter of persons.

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3. **The conflict between good and evil:** It is the work of Satan, the adversary of God, within the Great Controversy that distorts the image of God through the various manifestations of sin—prejudice, suspicion, greed, discrimination, exploitation, and so forth—that are suffered by immigrants who seek only a better life and, who, in fact, have the fundamental human right to choose to move where they can have such a life. If freely moving from one place to another around the globe to work and live is a right we assume for ourselves, it is a right we must concede to our immigrants.
4. **Our adoption as sons and daughters of God:** No human being is worthy of salvation. It is only through Jesus Christ that we who were far from God are now “adopted” into the family of God. The migrant as well as the native-born are both adopted children of the eternal Father, placing us on equal footing before God. It is not where on the planet or in what station of society we were born that matters. It is the compassionate choice of a loving God that opens the door of salvation and “childship” to all.
5. **The Christian life as a sojourn:** F.B. #11 suggests that the Christian life is a journey of growth in the fruit of the Holy Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22). The following statement in F.B. #11 reflects how this process of spiritual growth can be applied to the stranger: “As we give ourselves in loving service to those around us and in witnessing to His salvation, His constant presence with us through the Spirit transforms every moment and every task into a spiritual experience.” This passage confirms what many of us who have worked directly with the immigrant poor have experienced: the very presence of God.
6. **The church as inclusive and united community:** Among the privileges of the “called-out-ones” that form the church is that of “service to all mankind,” according to F.B. #12. Real coexistence with the stranger calls on the practice of the highest virtues of the Christian faith, not the least of which is generosity with what we have and who we are and the willingness to share it with those new to our land. The immigrant and refugee now living in or near our neighborhoods and getting baptized into our churches are an opportunity to grow and mature in our Christian faith and practice. But only if we have direct contact with them and walk in their shoes and share in their experience of want mixed with hope.
7. **Sharing the Lord’s Supper in humility:** One of the earliest rites of the Christian faith is the Lord’s Supper (F.B. #16). As a prelude to this time of sharing is a time of humility, a time to kneel before an offended or offending brother or sister to confess, repent, and be reconciled. At the same time, the ceremonial act of washing a brother or sister’s feet is an equalizing act of acceptance. We humble ourselves to make room in our hearts and minds for the “other,” for the one who is different in language, nationality, and mindset. The current “separate, but equal” places of Adventist worship do not yet allow for the kind of true Eucharistic unity Jesus envisioned for His Church. This is an issue that a theology of migration can discuss and define more clearly for our church.
8. **Exercising the spiritual gifts:** Among the spiritual gifts listed in F.B. #17 are “reconciliation, compassion, and self-sacrificing service and charity for the help and encouragement of people.” The purpose of all the spiritual gifts, including these, is for the spiritual maturity of the Body of Christ, the building up of the Church in “faith and love.” The exercise of these particular gifts is meant to move the members of the Body of Christ beyond distinctions that separate or that place members in a destructive hierarchy of preference. Compassion rather than criticism; generosity rather than selfish protection of what is perceived only to be ours; kindness rather than disdain; words of encouragement rather than words that hurt.
9. **The inclusive Sabbath as equalizer:** The Sabbath is important because it reminds us of the character of the Creator; His redeeming power, and our duty to our fellow humans, whether they are native-born, servants, or strangers. The covenant of the Sabbath is with all humanity and even with the animal and vegetable world. Release from work and enjoyment of the privileges of rest are inclusive privileges that we are invited to share with all those within our sphere of influence. Those privileges of rest are meant to draw the diverse Body of Christ together. How that might happen during Adventist Sabbaths, currently divided by race and culture, is a challenge that can be

met by the development of a theology of migration.

10. **The Law of God provides justice for the stranger:** F.B. #19 states that obedience to the Ten Commandments is “an evidence of our love for the Lord and our concern for our fellow men.” Because the immigrant often finds him or herself struggling to negotiate new patterns of living in a new country and often in a new language, they are easy prey of the crimes of exploitation. Christians are called on to practice justice toward the stranger. During the six days God has given us to “work,” we must do the works of justice and mercy toward all those who cannot speak for themselves or defend the rights with which they are divinely endowed. Otherwise we cannot rightly enter the Sabbath “rest.”
11. **Stewardship toward the stranger:** Faithfulness in giving is fundamental to the survival of the church. Stewardship of money and time is meant to be directed toward the sustenance of the church’s work, which includes the poor and the stranger. As we have seen, Ellen White calls on Adventists to go beyond the offering plate and prioritize our time to include working and sharing with those who can be blessed by our presence even more than with our money. Beyond time and money, believers are also the stewards of the fruit of the Spirit as they apply to those who cannot speak for themselves or defend themselves from those who would steal their means and their dignity. Stewardship addresses the sins of silence and complicity because it implies active cultivation not only of money or time invested in relationships, but of the virtues that unite us rather than divide us.
12. **The Remnant church and its mission:** The work of the last church in human history is one of calling for repentance and reform. This work assumes there is evil in the world. But the Book of Revelation makes it clear that the Christian church is no mere observer of the evil that goes on in the world. Evil abides in the Church and must be counteracted with repentance from wrongdoing and reform through the practice of the saving virtues. This is a new call to keep the commandments and trust in God as Jesus did when He was on this earth, for few of us of our own accord can make the necessary changes in habits of thought and action demanded by our high calling to true unity in Christ. Our mission begins in

the intimacy of our prayer life with God. Out of this fertile spiritual womb will come the words and actions of holy consecration to justice and mercy in all our dealings with others.

Adventism and the Stranger

As Adventists begin the dialog surrounding our own “theology” of migration, our strengths, in my view, lie precisely in what we claim to believe. There is not one of our twenty-eight Fundamental Beliefs that cannot be used to bolster a new way of looking at the stranger among us. Our passion for mission and service is a solid foundation on which to build a balanced theology of migration. At the same time, there are habits of thinking and acting that need some adjusting in order for the door to the stranger to be fully opened in our church. How do we currently prioritize issues of justice and mercy? Is religious liberty the only human right for which we are willing to fight? Are the human rights of the Latino immigrant (or any suffering immigrant, for that matter) something that should concern us? Why? What does “I was a stranger and you welcomed me,” mean to Adventism in the context of the current debate surrounding immigration reform for the twelve million undocumented Latinos living in this country?

Finding a way of adapting our beliefs and practices to the acceptance of, unity with, care for, and even advocacy for the immigrant will only enhance that much more who we are as a church and as practicing Christians.

Notes and References

Unless otherwise noted, all references from The Holy Bible are from the New International Version.

1. Brentin Mock of the Southern Poverty Law Center (hereafter referred to as SPLC) lists a series of hate crimes experienced not only by Mexicans, but by Cubans, Ecuadoreans, Central Americans, and American-born Latinos (“Immigration Backlash” *SPLC: Intelligence Report*) ranging from murder to property damage.
2. For more details about the work of Humane Borders, see Robin Hoover’s “The Story of Humane Borders” in Groody, *Perilous*, 160–173 and the Humane Borders website, www.humaneborders.org/about/about_index.html.
3. The multidimensional challenges of Latino immigration are being addressed by a range of clergy (*Ibid.*, 89–106).
4. “While God’s chosen people were to stand forth distinct and holy, separate from the nations that knew Him not, they were to treat the stranger kindly...” 6T. 274.

5. "Thus may be won to our ranks, and from among these may be developed laborers who can proclaim the message to those of our own nationality in our own land and in the other nations of earth" (*Review & Herald*, July 25, 1918).

6. "After you have given something for foreign fields, do not think your duty done. There is a work to be done in foreign fields, but there is a work to be done in America that is just as important" (8T. 36, January 23, 1904).

7. "While God's chosen people were to stand forth distinct and holy, separate from the nations that knew Him not, they were to treat the stranger kindly. He was not to be looked down upon because he was not of Israel. The Israelites were to love the stranger because Christ died as verily to save him as He did to save Israel ("Our Duty to the World,"

6T. 273–280).

8. "The instruction given [by God] was that should such separation take place, it would not tend to advance the interests of the work among the various nationalities. It would not lead to the highest spiritual development. Walls would be built up that would have to be removed in the near future...If we are to carry on the work most successfully, the talents to be found among the English and Americans should be united with the talents of those of every other nationality" ("German and Scandinavian Conferences," 9T. September 1, 1905, 195–198).

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