IMMIGRATION AND THE CHRIST-LIKE RESPONSE

All sessions are recorded and made available on Erin Presbyterian's webpage.

bridge builders

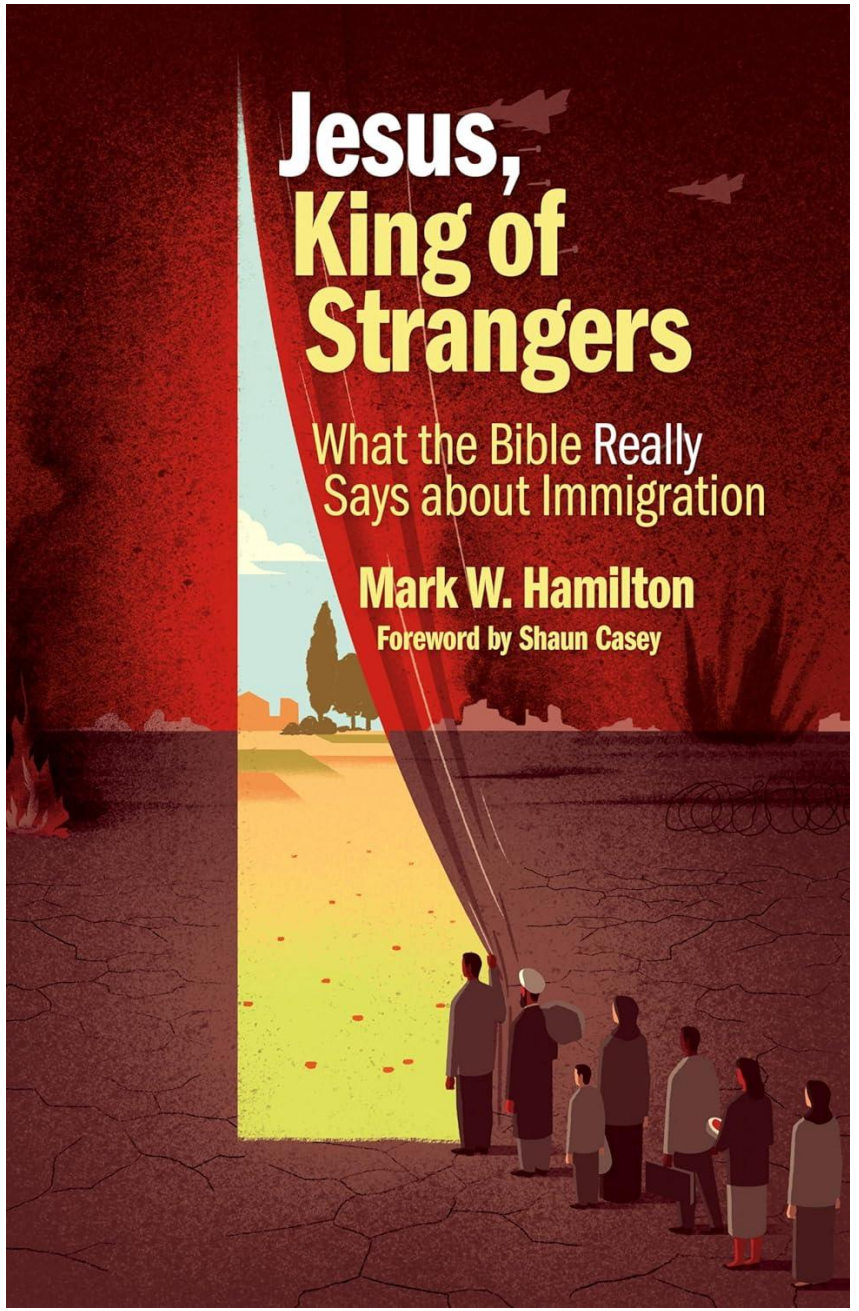
A MINISTRY OF
ERIN PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
KNOXVILLE, TN

YES, THE BIBLE SPEAKS CLEARLY ABOUT IMMIGRANTS/STRANGERS*

Jesus, King of Strangers examines the Bible's key ideas about human movement and the relationship between migrants and their hosts. Hamilton argues that reclaiming the biblical language will free the church from hypernationalism and fear-driven demagoguery.

Mark W. Hamilton is professor of biblical studies at Abilene Christian University. His recent other books include *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament and A Kingdom for a Stage*,

Eerdman's, 2019



HISTORY Israel's foundational history is one of migration. The patriarchs and ancestors were sojourners, refugees and alien residents again and again.

LAW Laws of Kindness in Leviticus and Deuteronomy instruct justice and kindness to immigrants, making care for foreigners a moral duty (*repeatedly recalling their own heritage as migrants*).

TEACHING & PRACTICE Jesus both taught and modeled loving one's neighbor, underscoring the moral imperative to support and include migrants.

ABRAHAM'S JOURNEY

CA. 2000 BC

Foundational History: Abraham and descendants (Genesis 12)

Abram (from Ur), Sarai and Lot migrate **to Egypt** (Genesis 12) –first settling in the Negev (southern Judah) until famine forces them on.

Universal Themes:

- **Move prompted in part by disaster (famine)**
- **Come to reside in a specific place (Egypt)** with its own culture/power structure
- Ignorance about that power structure leads to **fear and survival strategies.** (Abram fears for his life because his wife is beautiful, so tells her to say she is his sister.)
- **God "punishes" Pharoah (plague) for taking Sarai into his household**
- **Women/children suffer mistreatment and subjugation** by migrant and host cultures.
- **God takes up the plight of the migrants.**
- **Significant moral issues make the story messy**: Deception, mixed allegiance, compromise.

ABRAHAM'S JOURNEY

CA. 2000 BC

Foundational History: Israelites as Migrants and Alien Resident (Gen. 20)

Abraham and Sarah leave Egypt and take up residence in Negev/Negeb
(within small (city/state of Gerar near present-day Gaza ***hence the Hebrew verb "gur" to migrate or sojourn --and "ger/gerem"*** *noun* ***for migrant/s.*** ***(***Genesis 20)

Universal Themes:

- **Residence in a specific place (Negev/Judah near modern-day Gaza))** with its own culture/power structure
- Ignorance about that power structure leads to **fear and survival strategies.** (Abraham assumes that there is "no fear of God or reverence here) and ***again*** passes off Sarah as his sister to King Abimelech.)
- **Women/children suffer (made barren)** by migrant and host cultures.
- **God takes up the plight of the migrants.**
- **Significant moral issues** make the story messy: Deception, mixed allegiance, compromise, identity

Isaac & Rebekah as Refugees (Genesis 26)

Years later, **In response to famine, Isaac and Rebekah leave Canaan and go to Gerar (town) –becoming "gerem (sojourners/migrants)**

Themes: (in some cases, *conventions* of story-telling and folk-lore)

- Begins with **residence in a specific place** –Canaan
- Their new residence has its own **power structure** – King Abimelek still on throne
- Because Isaac's fear was aroused by his wife's "sexual desirability," **he devises the same strategy for survival (casting Rebekah as his sister)**
- **Ultimately, Isaac is cast out because he is "too powerful"**
- **God takes up the plight of the migrant.**
- Significant **moral issues** make the story messy: Deception, mixed allegiance, compromise, identity
- **The migration story becomes foundational to the nation**

THE EXODUS: Israelites as Refugees and exiles (Exodus 1-2)

Perhaps **most significant episode** in Israel's collective history:
Moses and Aaron lead the Israelites out of Egypt.

Themes

- Begins with **Joseph's** distant descendants in **residence ((Joseph and his immediate descendants now dead)**
- **Egypt**--with a culture/ and *changing* power structure --a new pharoah/tyrant on the throne – a "**bad host**" **
- Israelites valued only as **slaves/wet nurses/commodities**
- **Migrants perceived as menacing** (too many, too strong, too *other*)

- ** "Here the ruler (a tyrant who has forgotten the commitments his predecessor had promised to Joseph's descendants) *brands a group in his territory as a potential enemy, not because of any fault but because they are robust and alien.* ***ESSENTIALISM*** . *For pharoah, only two classes of people exist:* ***them and us****." –Hamilton*

MOSES' JOURNEY CA. 13TH TO 15TH CENTURY BCE –

Biblical scholars question the factual authenticity of the exodus the story remains pivotal in Jewish/Christian literature and theology

THE EXODUS: Israelites as Refugees and exiles (Exodus 1-2)

Themes (continued)

- **Strong power system in Egypt** Host nations often use sexuality and **mistreatment of women** as tools of control/oppression. (by killing of Israelite male infants and leaving bereft mothers with no social/financial status or protection)
- **God takes up the plight of the oppressed** (Through Moses & Aaron, plagues, parting of the Red Sea, Commandments, manna . . .)
- Significant **moral issues** complicate the events: Deception*/ "civil disobedience"* (of midwives, Miriam, pharoah's daughter,) mixed allegiance (Moses), idolatry, compromise, identity
- **The migration story becomes foundational to the nation**

THE EXODUS: Israelites as Refugees and exiles (Exodus 1-2)
(Exodus 1-2)

Important themes

- The migrants suffer from hunger, thirst, disorientation, impatience, division and rebellion against Yahweh and Moses/Aaron
- They do not remember God's faithfulness or their former desperation.
- They worship gods of their own making
- They fight among themselves

Babylonian Exile (diaspora) (early 6th C BCE): Invasion and deportation were routinely employed by the Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians.

- *"Golah" (Gr.)* came to identify *members of a group/nation who are deported and come to live outside their ancestral homeland*.

- Despite the "golahs' " separation from Israel, a group consciousness prevailed. This exile proved to be the landscape in which the Hebrew people "re-thought their traditions and theology." Much of Old Testament literature derived from or was reshaped by the Exilic period.

Hamilton writes, "Migration is a form of education, even in the extreme case when the community experiencing it understands it as divine punishment."

What might Israel's long experience of exile in Babylon have taught them?
Are there current applications today?

What might Israel's experience of exile have taught them? Are there current applications?

To remember/ preserve history & codify theology

Similarities & differences of thought/religion among other peoples

Similarities & differences of cultural practices

To question what they knew

The universality/ omnipresence of God?

GOD SAYS “REMEMBER”

- “Now Jacob was settled in the land where his father had sojourned, the land of Canaan ***(where they were once strangers.)*** **Genesis 17:8**

- “You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, ***for you were strangers in the land of Egypt***.” **--Exodus 22: 20.**

- “You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of a stranger, ***having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt***.” **Exodus 23: 9**

- “ When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong him. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, ***for you were strangers in the land of Egypt***. -- **Leviticus 19: 33-34**

GOD SAYS "REMEMBER"

- "Cut away, therefore, the thickening about your hearts and stiffen your necks no more. For the Lord your God is God supreme, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who shows no favor and takes no bribe, but upholds the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and befriends the stranger, providing him with food and clothing. You too must befriend the stranger, ***for you were strangers in the land of Egypt***. (*The call to imitate God's beneficence to all.)* -- **Deuteronomy 10: 16-19**

- "You shall enjoy, together with the Levite and the stranger in your midst, all the bounty that **the Lord your God has bestowed upon you** and your household." **--Deuteronomy 26: 11**

- "Thus said the Lord God to Jerusalem: By origin and birth you are from the land of the Canaanites –your father was an Amorite and your mother a Hittite. ***(recognizing the mixed origins of Israel.)*** **--Ezekiel 16: 3**

WORKINGS OF POWER . . .

*"Behind the stories of exile lies a searching analysis of the workings of power –**especially its tendency to grind human fodder for the insatiable hunger of the mighty seeking to make their nation great again . . . .***

What do you observe in the "workings of power" today?

Are we also "grinding human fodder" to grow rich? HOW?

Law

Collections of law codes in the Torah:

- Ten Commandments
- The Covenant Code
- The Priestly Code
- The Holy Code
- The Deuteronomic Code
- The Curses Code

Law

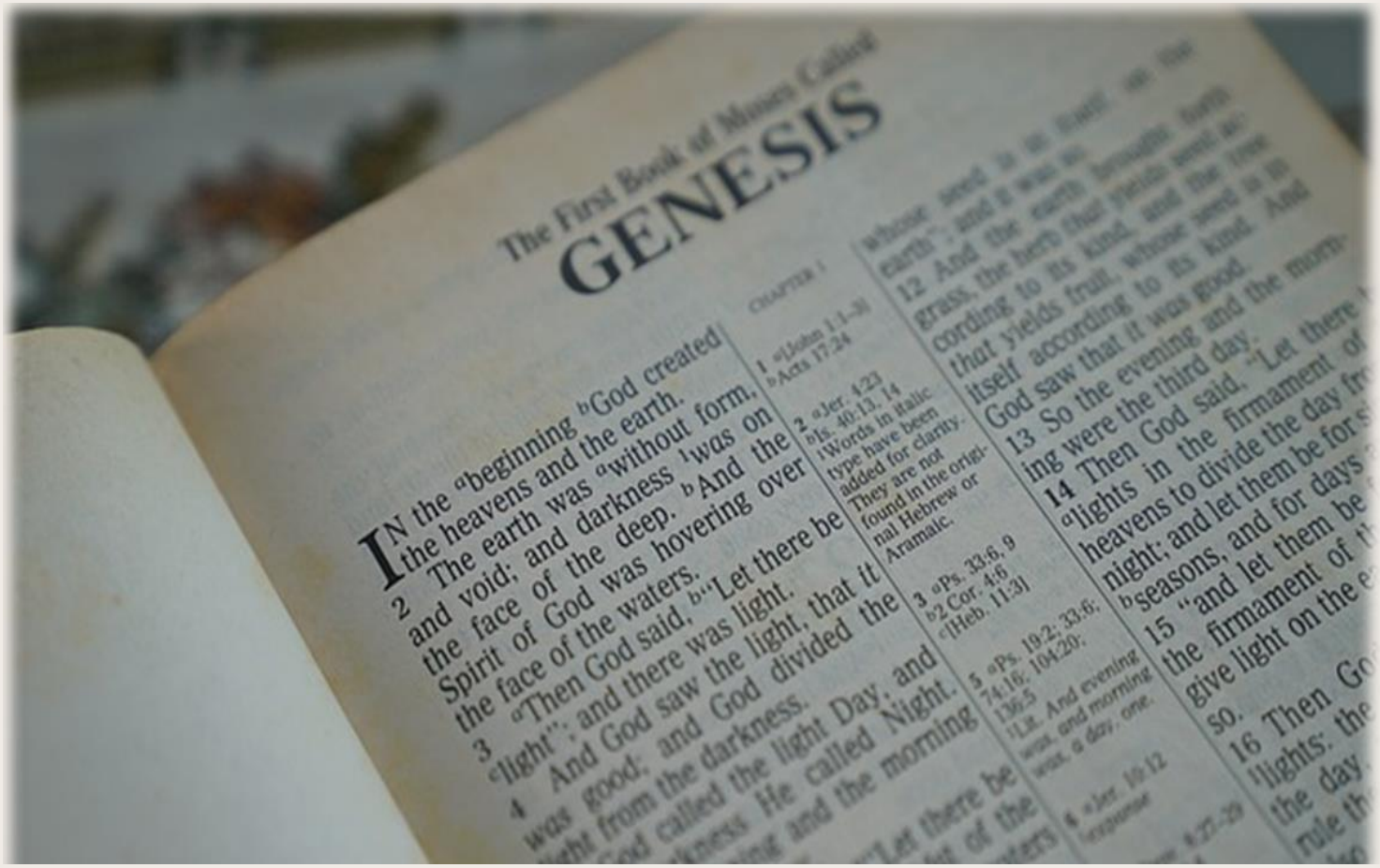
All contain one or more statements about Israel's responsibility to the "ger" –often linking the **stranger** to other vulnerable groups lacking protection-- **widows** and **orphans**.

Law –the Covenant Code

Laws set forth for an agrarian society of small villages with no central authority *(**lacking defined boundaries or rules of citizenship.)**

*"If you harm or oppress them (gereem) in any way . . . **I will kill you** with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children fatherless," God.* Exodus 22: 23-24.

While Leviticus and Deuteronomy, instruct kindness and justice for immigrants, **Jesus teaches & models love for one's neighbor, especially the vulnerable: widows, orphans, and strangers.**



CHRIST'S LESSONS

TEACHING & MODELING

- What stories did Christ teach about the stranger?
- Was the message consistent?
- How do we apply his actions and teachings?

CHRISTIANS AS XENOS (GREEK)

Jesus saw himself and his followers as "Xenos" –strangers; those who have migrated to a place where locals greet them as outsiders.

"The king will say to those on his right, "Come on, you who are blessed by my father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you . . . . I was hungry and you fed me, thirsty and you gave me a drink, a ***xenos*** *and you housed me, naked and you clothed me, sick and you nursed me, in prison and you came to me."* (Matthew 25: 34-36.)

The Syrophoenician Woman (Mark 7)

- The Roman Centurian (Matt. 8)
- The 10 men with leprosy (Luke 17)
- Zacheus, the tax collector (Luke 19)
- Samaritan woman at the well (John 4)
- Others?

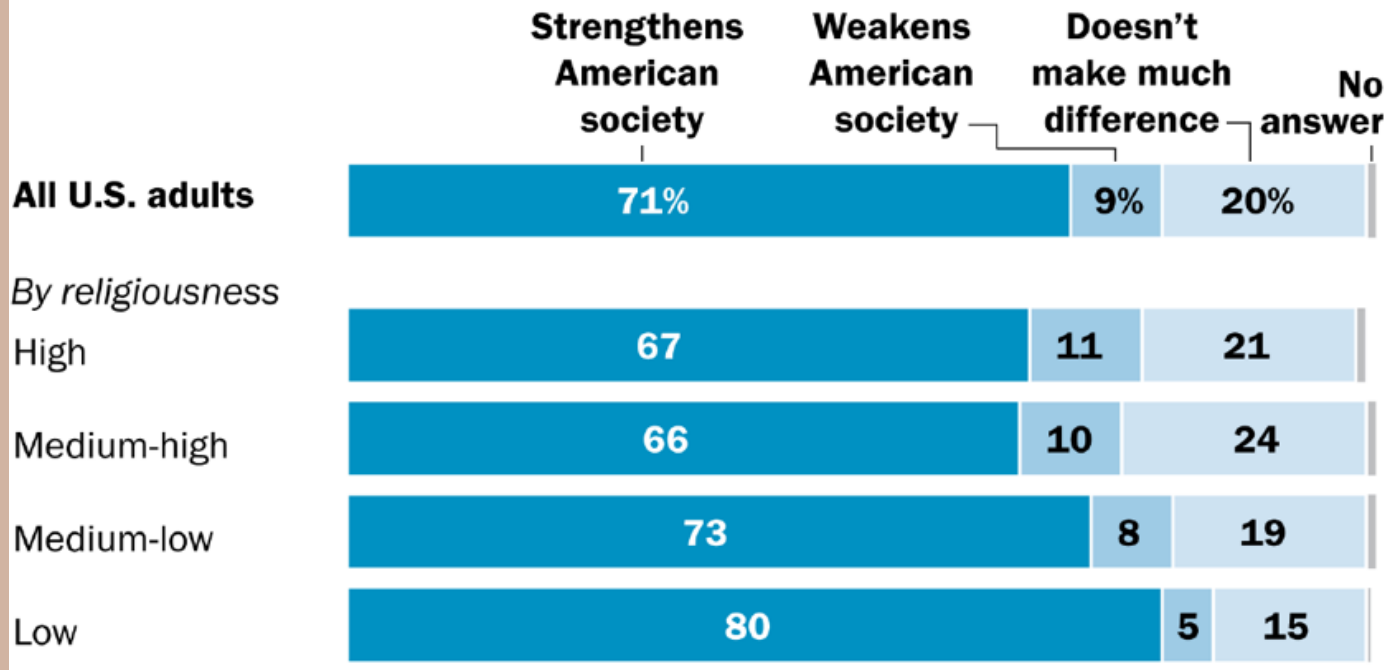
“ We need a way of thinking about human movement that allows us to honor the best traditions of both the migrant and the host.

And we need. . . A deeper understanding of strangeness that understands migration and the reception of migrants as a vital—creative, life-giving, knowledge-producing –aspect of human existence . . . .”

HOW DO WE AS CHRISTIANS AND BRIDGEBUILDERS WORK TOWARD THIS GOAL?

71% of U.S. adults say the country's racial and ethnic diversity strengthens American society

% who say the fact that the U.S. population is made up of people of many different races and ethnicities ...



Note: Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding. Religiousness scale is based on responses to four questions: prayer frequency, belief in God and/or a universal spirit, religion's importance and religious service attendance. Responses were added together to form a scale ranging from 0 to 8 and then subdivided roughly into religiousness quartiles. Refer to the accompanying text for more details.

Source: Religious Landscape Study of U.S. adults conducted July 17, 2023-March 4, 2024.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Why does greater "religiosity" lead to less tolerance of different races & ethnicities?

52% of U.S. adults say religious diversity strengthens American society

% who say the fact that the U.S. population is made up of people of many different religions, including people who are not religious ...

	Strengthens American society	Weakens American society	Doesn't make much difference	Don't know/ Refused
All U.S. adults	52%	18%	29%	1%=100%
Religiously affiliated	47	23	29	1
Christian	44	25	30	1
Protestant	41	29	29	1
Evangelical	35	38	26	1
Mainline	52	17	30	1
Historically Black	43	18	38	1
Catholic	50	16	33	1
Orthodox Christian	49	20	31	<1
Latter-day Saint (Mormon)	65	15	20	<1
Other religions	71	9	19	1
Jewish	73	5	20	1
Muslim	69	13	17	1
Buddhist	66	12	22	0
Hindu	79	3	17	1
Religiously unaffiliated	64	7	29	<1
Atheist	75	6	19	<1
Agnostic	76	5	19	<1
Nothing in particular	57	8	34	<1

Note: Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding.
Source: Religious Landscape Study of U.S. adults conducted July 17, 2023-March 4, 2024.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Religious Diversity

How can I help w/o risking civil disobedience?

On January 20, 2025, the Trump Administration ***rescinded*** a policy that required ICE agents to seek additional authority prior to conducting immigration enforcement actions in locations like churches, schools, and hospitals. It's important to know what protections exist and the legality of certain actions:

✕ ILLEGAL:

✕ Bringing undocumented immigrants to the US; concealing, harboring, shielding them from detection/ transport

✕ Encouraging them to remain in the US.

How can I help w/o risking civil disobedience?

LEGAL:

✓ Providing food/water to undocumented immigrants

✓ Speech/counseling is generally not considered “encouragement”

✓ House those in need without inquiring about document status.

✓ Welcome all to your faith community without asking about immigration status, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or gender identity.

✓ Host legal service clinics, refer community members to social service organizations, and work with government agencies to serve immigrants who have already been processed by the government.

✓ Public witness in support of immigration transparency & reform

✓ Distribute red cards informing immigrants of their rights

YOUR CHURCH SHOULD . . .

- **Make a plan**
- Train workers/volunteers
- Analyze public and private areas and put up signs. (Your church can refuse to allow ICE access to private areas of the church without a judicial warrant.)
- Identify and consult with an immigration attorney who can be called by church workers or volunteers if ICE shows up. Be sure the attorney's number is known to church workers and volunteers.
- No one at your church is required to talk to ICE, give ICE agents any information, or say anything about anyone's immigration status. You should call your church's immigration attorney before speaking with ICE.
- **ACLU Sanctuary Congregations and Harboring FAQ**
- **National Immigration Law Center: What to Do if Immigration Comes to Your Workplace**

HOW SHOULD WE --THE CHURCH-- WITNESS TO NATIONAL GOVERNMENTS:

- Reject the view that obedience to the state precludes conversations about suffering, demonization of immigrants, amnesty, etc.
- Reject locating our primary identity in political/social communities
- Remember that baptism is the passport to our primary community
- Reassert America's fundamental principles
- Seek just, sustainable and legal framework to provide a covenant with non-citizens/aliens