

THE *Episcopal* CHURCH



Visit *your* Representatives, Neighbor to Neighbor

Why call them Neighbor-to-Neighbor visits?

Bringing together a delegation of faith and community leaders to establish and nurture relationships with your senators and representatives is crucial changing the “unjust structures” within our society. When members of Congress know their constituents care about refugees, family unity, humane enforcement, and immigrants’ rights, they vote accordingly. As both representatives and members of your communities, every senator and representative has an office – often multiple offices – in their home states. Visits to these offices are an impactful way to speak, neighbor to neighbor, with representatives and let them know the broken immigration system has affected your community.

Purpose of Neighbor-to-Neighbor In-District Visits

1. To fulfill the promise of our baptismal covenant and “strive for justice and peace.” Neighbor to neighbor visits put faith into action by demanding that senators and representative understand that we, as constituents and people of faith, want compassionate immigration reform
2. To persuade your senators and representative to vote for immigration reform that prioritizes family unity for all families and provides a pathway to full citizenship
3. To build relationships between people of faith and the public officials who make decisions that impact our communities

It is helpful to meet with your senators and representative as early into the 113th Congress as possible. Urge them to support immigration reform based on the principles of full citizenship and family unity. Building these relationships early is also important as you will want to follow-up with them after an immigration bill is introduced.

Theological Grounding and Church Policy

“Will you strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being?”- Baptismal Covenant, Book of Common Prayer

We work with our immigrant brothers and sisters to advocate for justice not only as part of our ministry of public policy but as part of our scriptural mandate. In the Old Testament alone there are 92 references to the stranger, and we are reminded, *“When immigrants live in your land with you, you must not cheat them. Any immigrant who lives with you must be treated as if they were one of your citizens. You must love them as yourself, because you were immigrants in the land of Egypt; I am the LORD your God.” (Leviticus 19:33-34, Common English Bible)*

In the Gospels, Jesus teaches that in welcoming and serving the sojourner, we welcome Jesus himself. *“I was a stranger and you welcomed me... when you have done it for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you have done it for me.”* (Matthew 25:35-40). The welcome that Jesus models and teaches his followers to exemplify is also found at the heart of the Good Samaritan parable, when he defines the good neighbor as *“the one who showed mercy.”* (Luke 10:37).

Firmly rooted in our ministry of welcome, the Episcopal Church has become a national leader in immigration advocacy. Informed by their experiences working with and in immigrant communities, individuals, congregations, diocese, deputies and bishops have brought the broken pieces of our immigration system to General Convention. The resolutions passed by General Convention form the immigration policy backbone of the Episcopal Church and seek to enact a more just and humane immigration system. With politicians across the spectrum defining a pathway to citizenship, enforcement and family differently, it is important to define these key terms when meeting with decision makers

A Pathway to Citizenship

For the majority of the 11 million undocumented immigrants residing in the United States, there is no accessible legal pathway through which they adjust their status and therefore remain with their families and seek lawful employment. The Episcopal Church supports nothing less than a pathway to full citizenship for undocumented immigrants wishing to come out of the shadows and will not support overly punitive measures such as making legalization contingent upon enforcement measures or restricted access to basic civil rights such as voting, accessing child tax credits or the ability to sponsor family members.

Resolutions:

- Urge the US Congress to enact comprehensive immigration reform to give undocumented persons who have established roots in the United States a pathway to legalization and full social and economic integration into the United States. (GC 09)
- Adopt the fundamental principles that undocumented immigrants should have reasonable opportunity to pursue permanent residency, legal workers should be allowed to enter the U.S. to respond to recognized labor force needs, close family members should be allowed to reunite without undue delay with individuals lawfully present in the U.S; fundamental principles of legal due process should be granted to all persons and enforcement of national borders and immigration policies should be proportional and humane. Furthermore, the Episcopal Church deplores any action on behalf of the government, which unduly emphasizes enforcement, including militarization of the border between the United States and Mexico. (GC 06)

Protecting and prioritizing unity for all families through immigration law that recognizes and includes same-sex partners and their families

Immigration is, at its heart, a family issue. Families create healthy individuals and serve as the foundations of strong communities. Whether raising per country visa limits which separate some families for decades, eliminating unlawful presence bars, or allowing unused visas to be put towards reducing the current backlog of family reunification cases, the rights of U.S. citizens and Legal Permanent Residents (LPR) to be reunited with their family members without undue delay or

prolonged separation should be both protected and prioritized under immigration law. The Episcopal Church supports this right to unity for **all** families, including the same gender domestic partners and spouses of U.S. citizens and LPRs. The Episcopal Church has repeatedly passed resolutions affirming these families rights to unity and reunification and continues to advocate for legislation that guarantees these families equality under immigration law through the [Reuniting Families Act](#) and the [Uniting American Families Act](#).

Resolutions:

- Urge Congress to enact legislation that permits same-gender domestic partners and spouses of United States citizens and lawful permanent residents to seek lawful permanent status in the same manner as different gender couples (GC 12)
- Urge Congress to provide immigration equality for same-sex couples by permitting a citizen or permanent resident alien to sponsor an immigrant partner for permanent residence in the United States. (GC 09)

Protection for Refugees and other Vulnerable Migrants

The Episcopal Church supports a robust refugee resettlement program for those fleeing their countries to escape persecution, oppression, and war. Through the Episcopal Migration Ministries, our Church has worked in public-private partnership with the U.S. Government to resettle thousands of refugees since the inception of the program in 1980. In the decades since this ministry to “welcome the stranger” began, however, we have welcomed an ever diversifying refugee population, including refugees from more than 69 nationalities and an increasing number of refugees with serious medical conditions, refugees who are victims of torture and severe sexual-gender based violence, and more single female heads of household. The Episcopal Church is committed to welcoming refugees to peaceful homes and hopeful futures in the United States but the laws that govern our refugee resettlement program and immigration system must change if the United States is to continue as the world leader in humanitarian resettlement.

Resolutions:

- Urge the United States Congress to reform the Refugee Act of 1980 in order to modernize the nation’s refugee program, including modernizations such as but not limited to meeting the urgent needs of a diverse refugee population through specialized and extended case management, culturally and linguistically appropriate mental health services, recertification assistance for refugees with a professional background, restoration of federal benefits from 8 months to at least one year, housing and transportation assistance, and other innovative policies that create sustainable integration pathways for refugees (GC 12)
- Urge the US government to extend the protection of asylum to vulnerable peoples, especially women fleeing mutilation or cultural practices that deny their full humanity. (EC 2/04)
- Urge the US government to apply its refugee policies in a uniform and equitable manner without regard to the nationality, race or creed of those seeking refugee status. (GC 94)

The DREAM Act

The Development Relief and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act would provide a path to legal status for undocumented youths who arrived in this country as infants or children and have grown up as members of our communities. The Episcopal Church strongly supports the DREAM Act. This act would provide immigrant youth the opportunity to pursue higher education and/or serve the United States so that they can become fully contributing members of our communities and eventually become citizens of the United States. Every child growing up in America deserves the opportunity to grow into full stature as a member of our society and to achieve his or her dreams. Withholding legal status from these children not only hurts them, but it deprives America of future generations of dedicated citizens, innovators, entrepreneurs and public servants.

Resolutions:

- Support federal legislation that presents a pathway to citizenship for undocumented youth and young adults while assisting undocumented youth, known as “DREAMers” in accessing higher education (GC 12)
- Urge the US government to allow undocumented youth who arrive as infants or children to pursue higher education and/or serve in the military in order to contribute to their communities and become citizens. (GC 09)

Enforcement

The Episcopal Church supports commons sense immigration enforcement policies that respect the dignity and worth of every human being. Those who break our immigration laws in order to do us harm need to be prevented and identified from doing so but the increased militarization of the border, programs that encourage racial profiling, and prison-like detention for migrants is not the solution. The Episcopal Church supports alternatives to costly and prison-like detention for individuals who pose no threat to public safety and the end to programs that separate families and erode trust between law enforcement and immigrant communities such as the 287-g and the Secure Communities program.

Resolutions:

- Decry the use of racial profiling as a reason to question an individual’s immigration status and call for the immediate end to the Secure Communities program which leads to lengthy detention of immigrants who have no serious charges against them and discourages victims of crimes, such as domestic abuse, from reporting those crimes (GC 12)
- Urge the US government to terminate any program that allows or funds local law enforcement agencies enforcement of immigration law, thereby allowing immigrant victims of crime to report it without fear of deportation. (GC 09)
- Urge the US government to establish a moratorium on roadside checkpoints and raids carried out by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) that tear families apart. (GC 09)

- Urge the US government to ensure that undocumented immigrant detainees are provided with humane treatment, adequate food and medical care and sanitary conditions. (GC 09)
- Urge the US government to consider alternatives to a costly prison-like detention system for immigrants. (GC 09)

Benefits for immigrants

The Episcopal Church believes that immigrants should not be unfairly barred from accessing benefits such as coverage under the Affordable Care Act or federal student loans.

Resolutions:

- Urge US government to ensure that needy immigrants are not unfairly denied essential services and benefits. (GC 97)
- Support a welfare system that does not discriminate on the basis of marital status, age, legal immigrant status or ability to identify other parent. (EC 2/95)

Your Neighbor-to-Neighbor Visit: BEFORE THE VISIT

- 1. Organize a team:** Before you meet with your senators and representative, get a team together. A team ideally includes faith leaders, service providers and/or people whose lives have been directly impacted by the immigration system. Be strategic in finding team members who best represent your community's call for immigration reform, who can commit to building an ongoing relationship with the member, and community leaders who the senator or representative may already know and respect. Aim for 5-10 participants for a visit, though a larger group can be a powerful sign of support for the issue. If you are considering bringing a larger group, check with the member's scheduler to see how many people the office can accommodate, and be sure your meeting is well-planned so that you are focused on your message and everyone knows their specific roles.
- 2. Find out who represents you in Congress & get to know your audience:** Go to www.senate.gov and www.house.gov to find out who your Senators and Representative are. Find out where they stand on immigration, including past votes on pieces of immigration legislation that are important to you. Their websites and a quick "Google" search will show how they vote and what they have said about immigration, as well as biographical sketches, campaign statements, district demographics, occupation, religion, political and social memberships, areas of interest, and positions on other issues, all of which can inform your approach to the meeting. For specific bills, www.thomas.loc.gov is a good resource.
- 3. Have a plan:** Meetings with decision makers should always be tied to your larger advocacy strategy, since meetings are just one of many activities important to winning humane immigration reform. Before you visit your members, *always* meet with the other participants to assign roles, including the facilitator, the personal story, specific issue area points, and the 'ask'. Practice by role playing before the day of your meeting so that everyone feels comfortable with their role and knows what to do. Review your talking points and prepare your materials. Consider bringing materials such as statements from specific faith groups and news clippings of relevant local events.

Suggested Meeting Roles:

The Facilitator will kick off the meeting by introducing your group, explaining the purpose for the meeting, and providing space for each person attending to briefly introduce themselves. Make sure each participant introduces which congregation and/or organization they represent. The facilitator will also jump in if the meeting goes off-track and redirect the conversation.

The Personal Story is key to every meeting. Someone should be present who has either been directly impacted by the broken immigration system, or has worked closely with those who have been separated from family members, detained, or deported. Telling this story will show how peoples' lives are impacted and how **your community** needs immigration reform.

Specific Issue Points: There will be specific points your group will want to make about immigration reform, including but not limited to the importance of family unity and a pathway to full citizenship, and what those mean to your community. It will be helpful to have one person take on each of these issues to show they are distinctly important. Present a brief two minute reflection from a faith perspective on why immigrants' rights are an important issue for your congregation.

The Ask is the critical part of the visit when you ask "Can we count on your support for immigration reform that prioritizes family unity for all families and provides a pathway to full citizenship?" Listen carefully and ask for clarification if what they say is vague.

- 4. Schedule a meeting.** Call, email, or fax the local offices of your Senators and Representatives to request a meeting with the member to discuss immigration. Make sure to tell them how many other faith leaders and community members would like to attend with you. If the member is unavailable, ask to meet with a staffer who works on immigration issues. Be persistent and don't be discouraged if you need to follow-up in order to get a meeting scheduled.

Your Neighbor-to-Neighbor Visit: DURING THE VISIT

Below is a suggested framework, but please adapt it to fit your team, your stories and your member of Congress.

Introductions: The Facilitator should start the meeting by thanking the member for their time, introducing the group as a whole, and then having each person introduce themselves.

People of faith throughout _____ (town/city/state) are committed to acting out our faith by being good neighbors to immigrant families. We do this by _____ (Include a story of the work you or other faith groups in your community have done in support of immigrants – anything from ESL classes, to legal clinics, to advocacy, to other ministries).

We count you, Senator/Representative _____, as our neighbor, too. We commend you for demonstrating the hospitality of our community by _____ (Find some comments or legislation the member has worked on in support of immigrant communities).

We'd also like to ask how you plan to be a good neighbor to immigrant workers and families going forward, especially as we work toward immigration reform in 2013.

Personal Story: Share a personal story showing the need for immigration reform.

Specific Issue Points: Provide the member the materials you prepared and explain why specific issues, such as family unity and a path to full citizenship, are important to your communities.

Path to Full Citizenship – Currently, there are very few ways for someone who is undocumented, including undocumented youth, to become documented. Immigration reform must create a process by which undocumented immigrants can earn lawful permanent residency with a pathway to full citizenship. This would allow our immigrant neighbors who already contribute to our community to fully participate in our society with the same rights that we enjoy.

Family Unity – Families are the basic unit of strong communities. Thousands of families have been separated by detention and deportation, and should be reunited. Lengthy visa backlogs and the exclusion of same-sex partners and their families force people to choose between being separated for extended periods of time, illegally entering the country or being forced to choose between the people and the country they love. Immigration reform must strengthen the family immigration system for all families, including the same gender domestic partners and spouses of U.S. citizens and LPRs.

Humanitarian Principles: Our current “enforcement first” model of immigration law has led to record deportations, record spending on interior enforcement and border security, and hundreds of thousands of families being torn apart. We seek an immigration system that recognizes inherent dignity of every human being, keeps humanitarian values at the center of our policies, and protects families from undue separation.

Make your ask: We believe that in order to truly be good neighbors to immigrants living and working in our communities, we must recognize the contributions and value they bring. Can we count on your support for immigration reform that prioritizes unity for all of our families and creates a pathway to full citizenship? How can we best support you in our mutual goal?

Listen well and take notes. Much of advocacy involves listening, providing opportunities for the member to ask questions, looking for indications of the members’ views, and finding opportunities to provide helpful information or correct misinformation. Members and staff will appreciate the chance to be heard instead of only being talked at. Ask questions and engage in conversation. Answer questions honestly. If you don’t know the answer, say that you don’t know but you will find out. Assign one person in the group to follow up.

Leave Behind Materials: Bring with you educational information, policy recommendations, sign on letters, charts, studies, faith resolutions etc., all within a packet of resources to leave behind with member’s office.

Thank you & invitation to prayer vigil: Thank you for your time and support. We will be hosting a prayer vigil for immigration reform in the upcoming weeks. Can we count on your attendance? In the meantime, please let us know how we can be a support to you as we all come together in _____ (town/city/state) be good neighbors and a welcoming community.

Remember to get the contact information and cards for the staffers you meet. Consider asking the member and staff to take a photo with your group – most politicians love the photo op!

Your Neighbor-to-Neighbor Visit: AFTER THE VISIT

Debrief your meeting

It's important to make sure you are all on the same page immediately after leaving the meeting, while the conversation is fresh in your mind. Make sure to leave the office building, so your debrief conversation can't be overheard. As a group, review: What did we hear? Did we get what we wanted? What are the next steps? Choose one person to send a follow-up email attaching the documents mentioned, providing answers to questions that came up during the meeting, and continuing to engage the member and staff in your group's work. It's also important to evaluate your group's work. How did we do as a team? Share the information learned during your meeting with your state coalition and other allies.

Communicate with your Base

Make sure to take notes and report back how the meeting went to other groups with whom you are working with. The information from your meeting will inform your next steps on strategic action and is important for those who couldn't come to the meeting to feel included in the process.

Follow up with your member of Congress

Send the staff you met an email thanking them for their time, attaching any documents you mentioned, providing answers to questions that came up during the meeting, and once again making your case for humane immigration reform.

Call Washington, DC

Call the Interfaith Immigration call-in line at 1-866-940-2439 or the Capitol Switchboard (202) 224-3121 to be connected to the DC offices of your senators and representatives. Introduce yourself as a constituent and ask for the staffer who works on immigration. Tell them about your meeting with their local office, ask what they are doing to champion immigration reform, and urge them to support humane immigration policies. Oftentimes the local and DC offices do not communicate about visits, so it's important to follow up with the DC office as well.

Let us know how your visit went

It's very important for us to continue to gather information about where your members stand on immigration reform. After you meet or speak with someone from your Senators' and Representatives' local and/or DC offices please fill out this feedback form:

www.interfaithimmigration.org/state-resources/register-in-district-visits-to-lawmakers-on-cir.

Advocates in DC will then follow up with the DC staff to reinforce your visit and to make sure we have an accurate vote count for immigration reform!

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