



*Welcoming the Stranger: Justice, Compassion & Truth in the Immigration Debate*

Revised and Expanded

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World Relief immigration experts Matthew Soerens and Jenny Yang move beyond the rhetoric to offer a Christian response to immigration. With careful historical understanding and thoughtful policy analysis, they debunk myths and misconceptions about immigration and show the limitations of the current immigration system. This revised edition includes new material on refugees and updates in light of changes in political realities.

## The Immigration Dilemma

After the presidential campaign of 2016, in which immigration became a central issue, the debate over how to respond to immigrants in the country illegally seems more polarized than ever.

Since the first edition of *Welcoming the Stranger*, another category of “stranger” has become particularly controversial: refugees, who have long come to the United States at the invitation of our federal government *with* legal status, have joined immigrants *without* legal status as a uniquely suspect category of foreigner in the minds of many Americans. As with the debate over illegal immigration, the refugee debate seems frustratingly simple to those on either side: to some, it is foolhardy to admit anyone from nations plagued by terrorism into our country, lest we welcome terrorists themselves. To others, welcoming the persecuted and oppressed is an unqualified good, integral to our national character. The two sides have a hard time understanding the other, as evidenced by harsh words shared over social media and even over family dinners and church potlucks.

Less vocal in these immigration debates are the many who suspect that immigration is actually a complicated, nuanced issue. Partisans of a particular policy position are apt to view the issue as very simple—right versus wrong, us versus them.

Yet, as political scientist Amy Black notes, it is these “easy” issues that often prove the most complex and the hardest to resolve since our presumptions keep us from hearing the other side. Within this debate, a growing middle recognizes this is not a simple issue. They want a more thoughtful, informed understanding of the issues than offered by the two-minute screaming matches by advocates of differing perspectives on cable news channels and talk radio.

Those of us who seek to follow Christ, in particular, face a challenge in sorting through the rhetoric to understand how we can reflect God’s justice as well as his love and compassion in designing a national immigration policy, and in the ways we relate individually to the immigrants in our communities. On first glance at the issue, we recognize that immigrants are people made in God’s image who should be treated with respect; at the same time, we believe God has instituted the government and the laws that it puts into place for a reason, and that as Christians we are generally bound to submit to the rule of law. Many are left conflicted, unsure of what our faith requires of us on this pressing issue.

Through the work of World Relief, the Christian ministry where we both work that serves refugees and other immigrants throughout the United States, we might find ourselves on a regular basis in a church, speaking with people about issues of immigration and citizenship, or in a congressperson’s office, talking with staffers about the need to fix the immigration

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## BOOK EXCERPT



*"Justice, compassion and truth are too often missing from the immigration debate in this country. Welcoming the Stranger provides all three with comprehensive information on every aspect of the current problem, its roots and commonsense solutions. Every Christian seeking an informed response to this critical issue should read this book."*

-Jim Wallis, president,  
Sojourners

system. Sometimes we speak in Spanish or with translation in Lithuanian, Arabic or Cantonese to an audience of immigrants eager to naturalize or fearful of what a newly announced immigration enforcement policy will mean for them and their families. Other times we are speaking in front of a predominantly nonimmigrant church group, answering questions about immigration policy. When we are in front of an audience of nonimmigrant evangelicals or before congressional staffers who are helping our political leaders form immigration policy, we find that many are asking the same questions we have often asked ourselves. This book seeks to address some of the most common questions and misconceptions that we and other Christians have wrestled with as we consider the immigration "problem."

This book is written out of our own personal experiences with this dilemma, tracing through much of the investigation our own questions have led us to in seeking to understand immigration policy – and, more important, immigrants themselves – through the lens of our faith. While it would be disingenuous to pretend that we do not have strong opinions about how we (as individuals, as the church, and as a society) should approach this issue, our foremost interest is not to convince you of the virtue of any particular piece of legislation. Rather, we hope this book will encourage our sisters and brothers to take a step back from the rhetoric and combine a basic understanding of how immigration works, and has worked in the United States, with a biblical worldview. We do not believe there is one Christian prescription to solve the immigration issue (though there may be decidedly un-Christian ways to view the issue), and there is plenty of space within the church for charitable disagreement on issues such as this.

*-Taken from chapter 1, "The Immigration Dilemma"*



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**Jenny Yang** is vice president of advocacy and policy for the refugee and immigration program of World Relief in Baltimore, Maryland.

**Matthew Soerens** serves as the US church training specialist for World Relief, the humanitarian arm of the National Association of Evangelicals. In that role, he helps local churches and denominations address issues of immigration from a distinctly biblical perspective.

## Making Sense of Immigration

**What motivated you to write *Welcoming the Stranger*?**

**Matthew Soerens and Jenny Yang:** Immigration is one of the most complicated issues of our time. Christians find themselves torn between the desire to uphold the laws and the call to minister to the vulnerable. We wrote this book to put a human face on the issue and tell stories of immigrants' experiences in and out of the system, to debunk common myths about immigrants and the US immigration system, and to encourage distinctly biblical thinking about a topic that is often viewed merely as a political, economic, or cultural issue. Our goal was to paint a more balanced, positive picture of immigrants in our country. We also wanted the book to be a practical guide for how churches and individuals can engage in caring for their immigrant neighbors and advocating for reform.

**Why is it important for Christians to think through the history of immigration and our current immigration system?**

**Soerens and Yang:** Immigration to the United States is a complex and difficult issue. Understanding our immigrant history and the limits of our current immigration system, as well as the theology of migration and God's care and concern for the vulnerable in Scripture, points the church toward a more compassionate, sensible, and just response. While evangelical Christians are often seen as hostile to immigrants, immigration has in fact been transforming the life of the church as evidenced by the growth of immigrant churches in the United States. At a time of heated debate around the country, Christians in particular can be a sensible voice for reason and compassion in our nation's immigration discourse and debate.

**What do you want readers to understand about immigration?**

**Soerens and Yang:**

- The Bible speaks repeatedly and specifically about how Christians should relate to the topic of immigration and, more importantly, to immigrants themselves, each of whom is a human being, made in the image of God, struggling to overcome significant challenges to give themselves and their families a better life.
- The United States has had a complex relationship with immigration since its founding, which continues today. The way many immigrants came to the United States until the 1920s is starkly different from how our current immigration systems work, which is significantly more restrictive.
- Immigration has transformed the spiritual landscape of the United States as some of the fastest growing churches and denominations are due to immigrants arriving as believers, or becoming believers once here.
- There are plenty of ways to get involved in serving your immigrant neighbors and raising your voice in advocating for immigration reform; in doing so, there is an incredible opportunity for mutual transformation.

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