

Welcoming the Stranger: A Conversation on Immigration with Pastor Mike McClenahan

November 15th, 2023

For over three decades, Solana Beach Presbyterian Church has committed facilities, staff, volunteers and financial resources to partnering with our Hispanic community. As our commitments have grown to know and love our neighbors, serve our community, and address issues in our neighborhoods, we are engaged in one of the most important issues of our time: immigration. We posed some questions to Pastor Mike about his perspective on this issue and our church's story.

Why do we focus on this immigration when there are so many issues of justice or social issues to address?

The simple answer is that we believe God has called us into this issue that directly impact our neighbors. As we have asked what God is doing in the neighborhood and how we can be a part of it, it is clear that seeds have been planted and watered over the years, and it was our calling as a church to continue to steward and encourage those ministries. We have taken seriously what it means to love our neighbor in personal and tangible ways that bless and help them flourish their God-given potential.

When did Solana Beach Church formally begin a ministry with our Hispanic immigrant neighbors?

In 1985 we began to serve migrant workers living in shacks in the camps in what is now Carmel Valley along what is now the 56 Freeway and along El Camino Real in La Costa. The North Country Chaplaincy was a non-profit started by members of our congregation and Rafael Martinez, a Cuban refugee, Presbyterian minister and professor of romance languages and literature. He and his wife Wilma moved to Encinitas in their retirement specifically to serve the migrant workers, developing a health clinic, immigration services, worship services and meals in the camps. That ministry and a church planting effort of our presbytery eventually started our first Hispanic worship service in 1990. Over the years we have renewed our commitment and adapted to changing needs and opportunities.

How did we begin tutoring children?

Spanish language worship services continued under the pastoral leadership of Don Juan Galdino. In 1997, he began tutoring four children in 1997 around a kitchen table what is now Casa de Amistad, a non-profit organization with 250 tutors one on one with 250 students pre-K through twelve grade, and includes a music program, STEM, character and leadership development. In 2005 we partnered with Reality Changers (RC) a non-profit organization that helps first generation students prepare for college. RC has an amazing track record for preparing students for college—virtually all students increase their grade point average and qualify for grants and scholarships that allow them to attend four year schools all over the country.

How did we begin to offer immigration services?

By 2013 volunteers began assisting Casa parents with ESL classes, and realized many of them did not have access to immigration services—either the financial resources or trusted counsel to help navigate the complicated immigration process. A conversation began between those volunteers and other church members and leaders who wondered how current immigration law, including pending legislation in Congress and the executive order for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), was impacting our neighbors. The result was the formation of the non-profit North County Immigration and Citizenship Center, now called Pathways to Citizenship. Pathways has department of justice certified counselors, offers classes to assist those seeking legal status and assimilating in our community, and has helped hundreds of individuals to become citizens, gain residency or DACA, or apply for refugee status.

How are Hispanic neighbors integrated in our church family?

The Hispanic worship services have continued since 2009 under the pastoral leadership of Juan Daniel Espitia. I think it's important to respect language and cultural differences, and at the same time lean into being one church, serving one Lord and learning from each other.

- Most of the participants are members of Solana Beach Church, some are serving as ordained Deacons for the Hispanic Ministries. The largest percentage of new members comes from the Hispanic Fellowship and are welcomed in worship.

- Three times a year we have integrated services to celebrate communion and ordain new elders and deacons.
- Over the years, our yearly mission trips to Oaxaca, Hungary, El Salvador, Rosarito for Come Build Hope and our monthly trips to Tijuana and migrant lunch program are integrated with Spanish and English speaking members, as well as Children's and Student Ministries.
- Since the pandemic, the Spanish speaking and the English speaking services are held concurrently at 10am and we share time on the patio for weekly coffee fellowship and monthly all church lunches.

How did you get involved personally in the issue?

I consider myself an accidental or reluctant immigration advocate. When members and leaders came to me to address the issue with our church family, I declined. I wasn't interested in a controversial issue that could bring division, but I did want to take seriously what it looked like for us to love and serve our neighbors. I said yes to having my seminary professor Richard Mouw preach on hearing the cries of the vulnerable from Psalm 146, and moderate a panel discussion in the evening. A church mobilizer from Orange County came to the gathering and asked me if I would help other churches get involved. I was so surprised by the invitation, I heard it as a call from God to say yes. I've tried to say yes since 2013, trusting God's calling to this specific issue to encourage other pastors to say yes, and to tell the story of our church. My journey has included writing three op-eds in the Union-Tribune, a visit to the Oval Office, several conferences in Washington, DC, and speaking at churches and conferences around southern California and across the country.

What motivates you to be involved?

Four things. First, was the biblical mandate to love and welcome the stranger: "Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt." (Leviticus 19:34) The New Testament continues this same theme when Jesus tells us to love our neighbor, even when they don't look or talk like us, and we may have to risk something. (Luke 10:33)

Second is my own story. I was raised in Presbyterian Church with a Spanish language worship service that included refugees from Cuban and immigrants from Latin America. When I was in college, they took me on my first trip to Tijuana where I first saw the poverty of those living in the dump. I was a Spanish major at UCLA, which gave me the opportunity to study Chicano and Latin American literature and study abroad in Spain. When I became a pastor in 1990, I began taking students across the border to build houses that would provide adequate shelter and keep their families together. Since coming to Solana Beach we have

Third is the influence of other pastors and theologians, I began to read and talk to other evangelical pastors and leaders in the Evangelical Immigration Table who understood immigration as a biblical issue, and were developing statements of biblical values and principles that I could support and with integrity encourage our elected officials to use as a guide in developing policies. I also have been influenced by theologians like NT Wright who write about participating in the Kingdom of God and helping others to flourish as a sign of the kingdom.

Finally, I began to understand the situation of our neighbors more personally. Many Hispanic families have roots in Solana Beach since the 1930s, settling their families and building homes while establishing businesses and working here in North County. As I empathized with the families connected to our church through our various ministries, I saw young adults working hard to be educated and wanting to contribute to our community, but living in the shadows. I heard of children with physical signs of stress for fear of family members deportation. It occurred to me: since we live by family relationships in the church, *those* children are not just *their* children, they are *our* children—so what should we do differently? How could I be a voice for those who don't have a voice? That was my primary motivation from moving from an accidental advocate to intentionally saying yes.

How do you stay current on this complicated topic?

I rely heavily on trusted advisors and partners to help me understand the complex issue of immigration. Matthew Soerens and Jenny Yang co-wrote "Welcoming the Stranger" which addresses the biblical mandate of scripture to know and love our neighbors, the history, economics and policies of immigration. World Relief has helped train and support the NCICC with Department of Justice certified legal counselors. The Evangelical Immigration Table provides resources and letters for pastors and leaders to sign to help influence our leaders with biblical values. The National Immigration Forum is also a great resource that connects business, law enforcement and faith leaders together in San Diego and across the country. Like others, I watch various news channels, but the coverage is almost always sensational, one sided and doesn't deal with the biblical values and principles I'm most interested in.

What are biblical principles for immigration reform?

The Evangelical Immigration Table, a broad coalition of pastors and leaders have developed six biblical principles for immigration reform: "As evangelical Christian leaders, we call for a bipartisan solution on immigration that: Respects the God-given dignity of every person, Protects the unity of the immediate family, Respects the rule of law, Guarantees secure national borders, Ensures fairness to taxpayers, Establishes a path toward legal status and/or citizenship for those who qualify and who wish to become permanent residents."

(<http://evangelicalimmigrationtable.com/#PRINCIPLES>)

How do you remain non-political or non-partisan as a pastor?

Unfortunately, the political divisions and rhetoric in our country today makes everything partisan and political. It's very difficult to have a civil and respectful conversation around anything political. I am not interested in being partisan, that is, telling anyone who or how they should vote or to support one political party over another. Our idea of being political has changed in my lifetime. To be political should be to contribute to the *polis* or the community. As Christians we are called to be salt and light where we work, live, play, and learn--to engage our world. Rather than adopt a fortress mentality, we take a posture of service, blessing others and demonstrating the kingdom of God. To be subject to governing authorities (Romans 13) in a democracy means we participate in our system of government with Christian values and principles as our primary guide. I may have a personal preference of political parties, but I would like to be bi-partisan and support elected officials who can support a particular piece of legislation, regardless of their party affiliation. What I am most interested in as a Christian is seeing our laws be more just and fair and reflect biblical principles. I am concerned about the polarization of our politics and I believe there is an opportunity for us to practice and model civil discourse in the face of name calling and demonizing. Salt brings out the flavor of life and preserves what's good; light shines in the darkness and gives life to all. I believe this is our calling as Christians who live in American in the 21st century.

Are we also addressing the root cause of migration?

Since 1998 we have partnered globally with organizations that are addressing the root causes of violence, poverty and education. With Plant with Purpose, we partnered for ten years with three villages in Oaxaca to address environmental, economic and spiritual transformation. Currently, in El Salvador we partner with a local church and child development center through Compassion International and sponsor 250 children at the center and throughout the country. We believe through holistic development and personal contact with child sponsors, we are making a difference for the next generation of leaders.

What other ministries do we have on the border?

Every Memorial Day weekend since 2006 we send a large group of students and adults to build houses with Amor Ministries in Baja California. Partnering with local pastors, Amor selects families who cannot otherwise build their own homes and who would benefit from adequate housing in the developing *colonias* in Tijuana and Rosarito. Keeping families together and safe means those who want for a better future for their families are more likely to stay in their home country. We partner Hope without Boundaries to cross the border monthly to four different locations to providing meals, volunteer labor, financial aid and support to local charitable organizations in the poorest parts of Tijuana, Mexico. Finally, as a member church of the Presbytery of San Diego, we have a mission partnership with 25 churches in the Presbytery of Northwest Baja to build bridges of learning and mission.

What is your hope for Solana Beach Church in this issue of immigration?

Our vision is to be a growing community of fully devoted followers of Jesus. My primary call as a pastor is discipleship, which means I'm learning to follow Jesus. I believe we are on a lifelong journey of becoming like Jesus for the sake of others. So, to me that means asking different questions around the greatest commandment of loving God and loving others. What is God doing in my neighborhood and how can I join him? Am I open to following Jesus into places that are difficult and maybe risky? What conversations can I be a part of to find solutions to complex issues? Where can I put into practice clear biblical teachings in my everyday life? Where can I use my gifts to serve others in personal ways? How can I learn from my neighbors with humility and grace? Where are there other Christians I can partner with to accomplish God's kingdom purposes? My hope is that we will continue to listen to Jesus and follow him and grow in our witness locally and around the world. My hope is that we find a way to serve in our community to demonstrate the love of God in tangible ways, through our volunteering, knowing and welcoming.