

Evangelical Views on Churches Engaging Immigrants: Implications for Congregations

World Relief 2024 Summary Report

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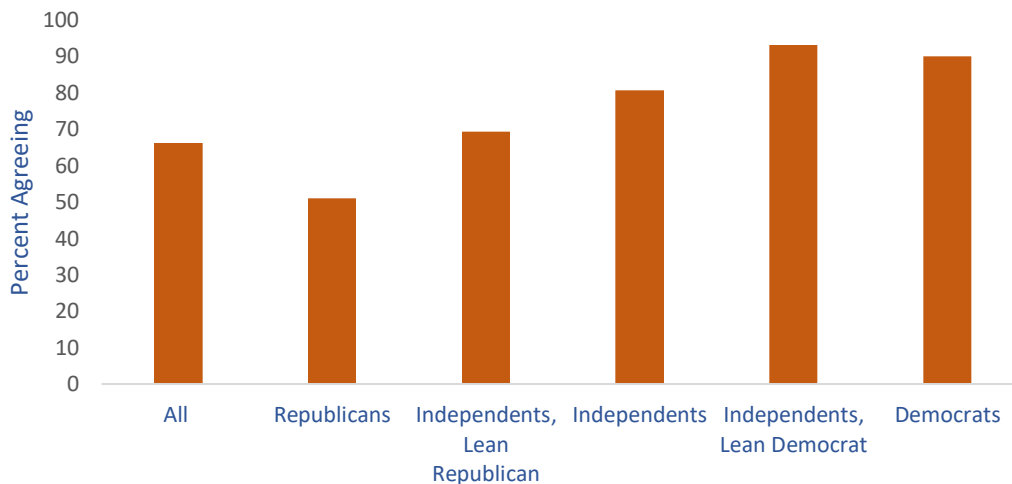
Introduction: Evangelical congregations have been on the frontlines of refugee resettlement and immigrant engagement in the U.S. for generations (Melkonian-Hoover and Kellstedt 2019). This work continues, as many congregations work with immigrants and immigration issue today, and more would like to, but the process can be intimidating. Our research considers how churches, leaders, and parishioners respond to these issues. Most churches come to this work based in a desire to serve others, and to share God’s love; as they do so, many turn to World Relief for expertise. Churches lay biblical foundations for responding; invite their congregations to be involved; and facilitate volunteering with immigrants, most typically via World Relief’s onboarding and capacity building. Our findings confirm that these efforts have and continue to make a difference.

This summer and fall we conducted surveys via a broad range of evangelical congregations (N=243 respondents) and our team interviewed church leaders and World Relief mobilizers in five diverse locales: Chicago, Memphis, Sacramento, Spokane, and Upstate, SC. The majority of our survey respondents were church going, middle-aged, white, and conservative evangelicals. (See QR code below for survey, interview, and research details).

CHURCH ENGAGEMENT WITH IMMIGRANTS

People want church engagement. 90% of our survey respondents are comfortable with church leaders discussing immigration in churches, and 65% are very comfortable with it.

Figure A: Churches Have a Moral Responsibility to Help Immigrants, Even if They are Here Illegally



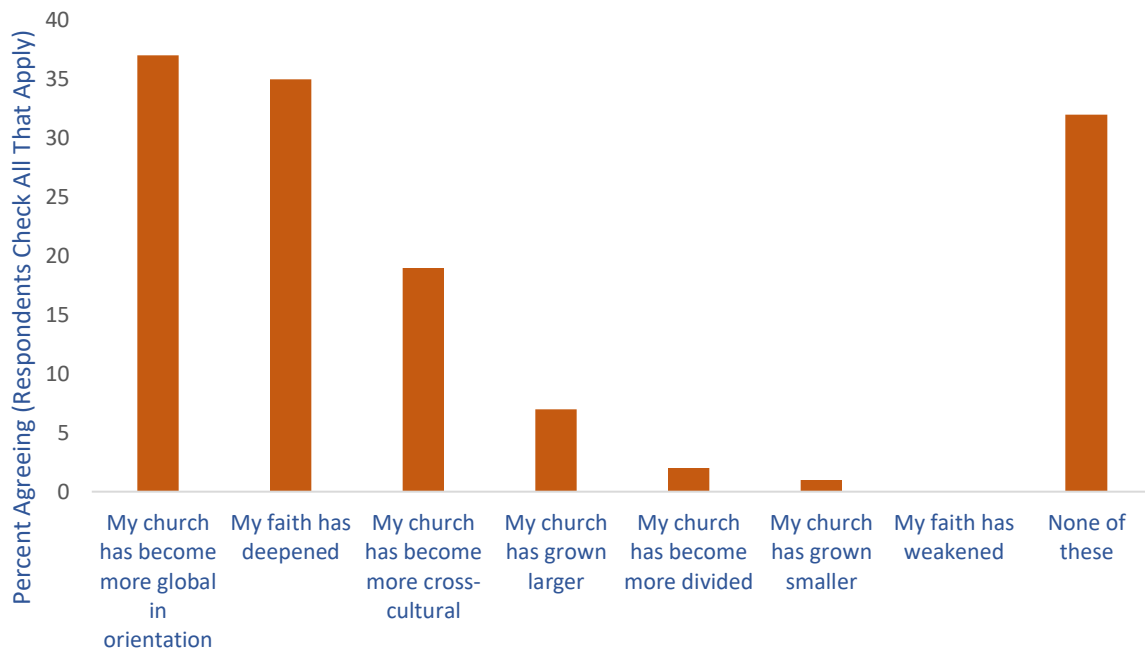
The majority of respondents are politically conservative or moderate, and most want the government to restrict immigration. But 66% say the church has a responsibility to help immigrants who are here, *even people here illegally*. Half of Republican respondents think this.

People are engaging. 34% of our respondents currently volunteer with immigrants and 24% more have volunteered in the past 10 years.

Churches that talk about immigration mobilize. People who say they hear sermons or stories about immigration at church are more likely to say immigration strengthens the U.S. and are less likely to say immigration poses threats. People who attend a church where they hear sermons and stories about immigration and where people invite them to engage, are more likely to volunteer.

Engagement often bears fruit for churches and individuals. When we asked people about the effects of their church’s engagement with immigrants, just over a third said their church had become more global in orientation and about 20% said their church had become more cross-cultural. Another third indicated that their own faith had deepened. Very few respondents selected a downside to engagement. Fewer than 5% selected that engagement increased church division or that the church had grown smaller. None said their own faith had weakened. As Stacy Keogh, regional researcher in Spokane noted, “Each of the church leaders I interviewed believe immigrant outreach is an expression of their Christian duty to love and serve others. . . . It reflects a commitment to addressing the needs of the vulnerable and marginalized, which includes immigrants who may face significant challenges in their new environments.”

Figure B: Impact of Church Engaging Immigrants



In Upstate, SC, one pastor told regional researcher Ryan Klejment-Lavin, “I do think the louder, more politically slanted minority of our congregation, it's tough to pastor them and have

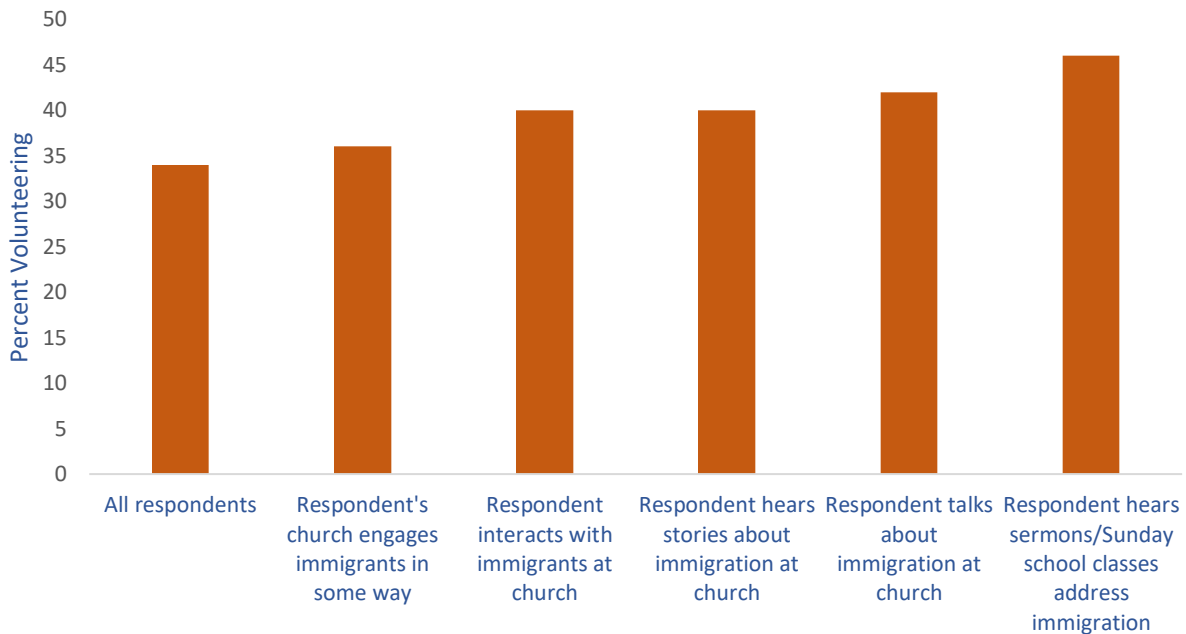
conversations with them about these things ... [However,] I do think there are tons of people in the congregation here, in the family of faith here that that would say, ‘No, no, I have to follow Jesus's lead on that. It confuses my politics, but as a follower of Jesus, yeah, I want to figure out ways to do that.’”

VOLUNTEERING WITH IMMIGRANTS

Cross-cultural experiences mobilize: 55% of volunteers said a faith-based cross-cultural experience like short-term missions played a significant role in their decision to volunteer. 21% indicated their own immigrant experience or that of a friend or family member played a role. Between 15 and 20% said one major world event or another (e.g., crises in Afghanistan, Ukraine, US border) was significant in their decision to volunteer.

Invitations mobilize (especially from friends!). As Terry McGonigal, World Relief chaplaincy consultant, highlights, “Like with so many other elements of the spiritual, the incarnational influence of trusted people plays a very important role.”

Figure C: Who Volunteers With Immigrants or Refugees?



Indeed, 40% of people who said someone from World Relief or a church leader invited them to volunteer are currently volunteering (fewer than 30% of those not invited are volunteering). Even higher, 53% of people who said they were invited by a friend are currently volunteering.

Barriers to volunteering are more practical than political. We asked people what makes it difficult to volunteer. By far the most common reason people chose was lack of time (53%), followed by language barriers (30%), concerns about immigrants’ legal status (20%), and lack of accessible volunteer opportunities (20%).

Flexibility, community, and training make volunteering more attractive. When we asked what would make it more likely that respondents would volunteer, 46% selected a flexible volunteer schedule and 32% identifying volunteer options near them. Another 40% selected opportunities to volunteer as a group rather than as an individual. 21% said they would be more likely to volunteer if they could shadow an experienced volunteer and 18% mentioned more extensive training.

Volunteering often bears fruit. When asked about the impact of church engagement with immigrants, 35% of volunteers indicated their faith has grown. People who volunteer have more positive views toward immigrants than people who don't. Of course, they might volunteer for just that reason, but volunteers report having positive experiences with immigrants and are more likely than non-volunteers to see immigration as a strength and not a burden to the U.S. As Jamie Goodwin, our Chicago area researcher, noted in conversation with a pastor: "It's experiential

"It's experiential discipleship—this process of volunteering, as you're doing it, it really changes you." Jamie Goodwin

discipleship—this process of volunteering, as you're doing it, it really changes you."

Volunteers have better experiences when trained. 93% of people who said they have received training from World Relief said they have either positive or very positive interactions with immigrants, compared to 71% of people who haven't been trained. In fact, 45% of those trained said they had very positive interactions, compared to 25% of people without training.

Conclusion: While evangelicals tend to have a conservative perspective on how the government ought to address immigration, within the sphere of the church, evangelicals see congregations as obligated to respond to immigrants. As we've found, churches play an indispensable role in laying biblical foundations for responding to the needs of immigrants; inviting their congregations to be involved; and facilitating volunteering with immigrants, where World Relief's training can make a difference. The implications are significant: robust immigrant engagement can help lead to the transformation of churches and communities.