

MATTHEW SOERENS & JENNY HWANG

Foreword by Leith Anderson

WELCOMING

THE

STRANGER

Justice, Compassion & Truth in the Immigration Debate



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THE IMMIGRATION DILEMMA

Most evangelicals are caught in between wanting to have responsible border policy with compassion for the alien. It makes coming up with a fair balance here very difficult.

Reverend Richard Cizik, in *The Washington Times*, January 14, 2007

Nearly everyone seems to agree that we have an immigration problem in the United States. The exact nature of the problem, though, is heatedly disputed. From one perspective, our nation is facing an unprecedented invasion of illegal aliens, who violate our laws upon entry and then become a drain on social services and public education systems, depress wages and displace native-born American workers, and then contribute to increases in poverty and crime rates. A flier for candidates for the Carpentersville, Illinois, city council prior to the elections of fall 2006 expresses the frustrations of many Americans:

Are you tired of waiting to pay for your groceries while Illegal Aliens pay with food stamps and then go outside and get in a \$40,000 car?

Are you tired of paying taxes when Illegal Aliens pay NONE!

Are you tired of reading that another Illegal Alien was arrested for drug dealing?

Are you tired of having to punch 1 for English?

Are you tired of seeing multiple families in our homes?

Are you tired of not being able to use Carpenter Park on the weekend, because it is over run by Illegal Aliens?

Are you tired of seeing the Mexican Flag flown above our Flag?¹

Others see the current state of immigration as a problem for very different reasons. They see millions of people who have, usually for economic reasons, accepted displacement from their home countries to pursue a better life for themselves and their families in the United States, just as generations of immigrants have done before them. Tragically, from this perspective, these people are not welcomed into our society, but are scapegoated and forced into a shadowy existence by broken immigration laws, even though they contribute to our nation's economy by performing a host of jobs, most of which few native-born Americans would be willing to do. Undocumented immigrant Elvira Arellano spent a year living inside a Methodist church in Chicago, Illinois, in an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to avoid deportation that would separate her from her eight-year-old, U.S.-citizen son. She has become something of a spokesperson for this perspective:

Out of fear and hatred of an enemy you cannot find you have set out to destroy our lives and our families. As you knocked on my door, you are knocking on thousands of doors, ripping mothers and fathers away from their terrified children. You have a list of 17 million Social Security no-match numbers, and you are following that list as if we were terrorists and criminals instead of workers with families. You are denying us work and the seniority and benefits we have earned, and you are taking the property we have saved for and bought.²

From either of these perspectives, the immigration dilemma seems frustratingly simple. As both sides rail against the other, and against the government, where Congress has proposed competing bills but has yet to pass into law any substantial changes in immigration policy, we are left with the status quo: an estimated 11 to 12 million people with no valid immigration status living and, usually, working in the United States.

Less vocal in the debate are the many who suspect that this 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.³ 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 and refugees 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 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 congressman’s office, talking with staffers about the need to fix the immigration system. Sometimes we speak in Spanish or with translation in Lithuanian, Arabic or Cantonese to an audience of immigrants eager to naturalize. Other times we are speaking in front of a predominantly nonimmigrant church group, usually in an adult education class, answering questions about immigration policy. When we are in front of an audience of non-immigrant 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 to which our own questions have led us in seeking to understand immigration policy—and, more important, immigrants and refugees 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 the reader 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.

Learning Through Relationships

More than just a policy question, immigration is also very personal to each of us, because of the many immigrants and refugees whom we have come to know. These relationships have transformed our own perspectives. Each immigrant, and each nonimmigrant affected by immigration, has a distinct story that cannot be summarized by abstract statistics or polling data.

I (Matthew) have been particularly marked by getting to know some of my neighbors. My first friend in the neighborhood where I live, whom I met even before I moved in, is Jean.* He is now a high school sophomore in a suburb of Chicago, but he was born in Rwanda shortly before genocide broke out in that small East African country in 1994. He fled with his family to Tanzania, then to the Congo and then finally to Zambia, where he lived for nearly a decade. In 2005, Jean and his family were

*Here and throughout this book we have, in some cases, changed names and identifying details of those whose stories we include to maintain their privacy. Anyone whose story is told in this book has given us permission to use it.

accepted by the U.S. government as refugees to be resettled in the United States. With the help of churches, volunteers, the Rwandese community already in the United States, and World Relief, they are making a new life for themselves step by step. His mother and father work very hard in difficult, low-paying jobs at all hours of the day and night to pay the bills and even to pay the U.S. government back for their seven transatlantic airline tickets. Jean is less concerned with his family's finances than about fitting in at his school, mastering American English (his fifth language, which he is concerned he speaks with an accent) and finding a lawn-mowing job for the summer. He is tired of sharing a bedroom with his four sisters, and he talks often about what he misses of Africa, but he thanks God that he is safe.

Another neighbor, Elena, has a very different story. She came to the United States from Mexico in 1990 at age twenty-six, crossing the border illegally with the very expensive assistance of a *coyote* (a people smuggler), hoping to find a job that would let her make ends meet—something she could not find in Mexico. She has now lived and worked here for more than fifteen years, is involved in her church (a Catholic parish that has nearly as many people in its Spanish-language masses each weekend as in its English masses), has married and divorced in the United States, and is now raising two children on a very limited income. She speaks enough English to work the drive-thru at the fast food restaurant across the street, but she is far from fluent and often comes by to ask for help reading a letter in English from her children's school; she often also brings delicious enchiladas or *chilaquiles*.

Elena is very proud that her children speak English but sometimes laments their reluctance to speak Spanish. She prays for a legalization of some sort, or that her U.S.-born children will eventually be able to help her get a green card. She notes the small amount of assistance that the African refugees like Jean's family receive from the government, for which she is ineligible, even though she too struggles to support her family. Still, she is happy to be here. "I live better here than in Mexico," she says. "Here, nothing lacks"—an astonishing statement, given that she sometimes falls

behind on the rent payments for the very modest one-bedroom apartment that she shares with three others in her family, cannot afford a car, and has no health insurance—“I have work. In Mexico, there is no work.”

Two doors down from Elena lives an African American family that moved from a rough neighborhood on the west side of Chicago, seeking to avoid the gang violence there. The mother, Serena, works at a fast food restaurant and is preparing to take the GED high school equivalency exam. She gets along fine with her neighbors—she even gives Elena’s daughter a ride to school on rainy days—but she does not think it is right that the Mexican immigrants come illegally and take jobs when her husband is out of work. She too notices the help that the African refugees receive from churches and wonders why something like that is not available for someone who was born in this country.

Living in relationships with immigrants, refugees and other low-income people has forced us to grapple with the question of what it means for us, as followers of Christ, to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. It has also awakened us to the ethically complex questions of immigration and refugee policy—whom do we let in, what do we do with those who came in even though our government did not allow them in, and what effect will our policies have on those already here and struggling to get by? Of course, our attempts to address these questions have been shaped by our own personal journeys.

My Personal Journey: Matthew’s Story

I grew up in an evangelical home, with parents who were (and are) very committed to their faith in Jesus Christ. We attended a nondenominational church where politics were seldom if ever mentioned. I suspect, though, that a survey would have shown that a large majority of my congregation, including my family and me, identified with a generally conservative political stance—particularly on issues such as abortion or homosexual marriage, but also probably on issues of immigration policy.

I had little exposure to immigrants growing up in the small city of

Neenah, Wisconsin. While Hmong people from Laos had been resettled in neighboring towns, I never interacted with them. There were a few Mexican and Asian immigrants in my town, but almost everyone in my elementary school was descended from white immigrants from Europe at least two or three generations back, if not more. My own ancestors came from Holland in the mid-1800s, long enough ago that the immigrant experience felt very removed from my reality; what I knew about immigrants and immigration I knew primarily from television. As I relocated to the Chicago area for college, I realized that immigrants and refugees were all around me, yet I still did not know them.

Ironically, I began to think a lot more about U.S. immigration while outside the United States. I spent a summer living and volunteering in San José, Costa Rica. There I played sports, tutored and led Bible studies in a community of immigrants from Nicaragua. Much like Mexicans and Central Americans who go north to find a better economic situation in the United States, hundreds of thousands of Nicaraguans have gone south, both legally and illegally, to take advantage of a more vibrant economy in Costa Rica—and like immigrants in the United States, Nicaraguans in Costa Rica are not always warmly welcomed.

I returned to Central America a few years later where I worked with World Relief and their local affiliate, *Pueblos en Acción Comunitaria*, as they sought to help farmers in rural Nicaragua raise their incomes by providing small loans. In my time there, I saw firsthand the extreme poverty and chronic unemployment that motivate many people to emigrate. Particularly when lured by promises and rumors (true or untrue) of generous salaries and unparalleled opportunity in the United States, many of the people I met hoped one day to find a better life in the north for their families, even if that meant going *mojado* (literally, wet—as in having crossed the Río Grande River illegally). Seeing the conditions in which many Nicaraguans live—for many, on less than \$1 per day—I could hardly blame them for entertaining this option.

When I returned to the United States, I accepted a job with World Relief's office in the suburbs of Chicago, where I was able to use my Spanish

language skills to partner with churches to assist immigrants and refugees in integrating into our society. In the process, I have gotten to know many immigrants and refugees, heard their stories and begun to understand why they left their home countries for the United States. My specific job description as an immigration legal counselor has also let me learn a great deal about our country's immigration laws, exposing my own previous ignorance: I have been surprised to discover that much of what I believed about immigration was inaccurate.

On graduation from college, I also decided to move into the diverse apartment complex where Jean, Elena and Serena live. My move was based, at least in part, out of a desire to really understand who my new neighbors are, to try to love them as myself (though I have not always done this well), and to share with them the grace and love that I have experienced in Christ. Within my apartment complex, located in a well-to-do suburb of Chicago, I have neighbors born in Mexico, Sudan, Somalia, Rwanda, Burundi, Sierra Leone, Burma, Vietnam and India, as well as many Caucasians (like myself) and African Americans whose ancestors came to this country decades or centuries ago. Being a part of this community has allowed me to put human faces on the immigration dilemma and has led me deeper into questions of how I ought to think about and act on the immigration "problem."

My Personal Journey: Jenny's Story

I grew up in a Christian home where both of my parents were immigrants from South Korea. My older brother and I were born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, a few years after my parents immigrated to the United States.

My dad has one of the most amazing stories of resilience and strength of any immigrant I have ever met. His grandfather and father owned a large, well-regarded newspaper in Korea in the early 1900s. Through this company a love for journalism grew in my family. During the Korean War of 1950, the Communist forces invaded Korea and proceeded to kill all the media personnel first. My grandfather was killed during the war, and my father, still an infant, was left with his mother, who eventually became

sick and died when he was ten years old. My father was an orphan and extremely poor in a country where rice and spare portions of vegetables were the meals of the day, and where a single pair of shoes with holes was supposed to last you years through the winter snow and summer heat. My grandmother, however, was a Christian. (A large number of Koreans were being brought to faith by American missionaries who were entering Korea in large numbers at the time.) Her faith in God led my father to also accept Jesus Christ as his savior at a very young age. His faith in God sustained him through his parents' death and as he lived with his uncle, who was also poor and struggled to support my father through school.

In order to support himself my father tutored his fellow classmates and helped the teacher after school to earn money for food and school supplies. He eventually became president of his class in high school. Having loved cars all throughout his childhood, he applied for a grant to go to Japan to visit the car manufacturing factories there. He received the grant and went to tour the Japanese car manufacturing facilities, which deepened his love for cars. Upon his return, he wrote a report for the company that employed him. My dad learned how to fix cars in his local neighborhood and eventually entered a national car-repair competition where he won first place. One of the judges during the competition noticed my father and asked him if he would like to go with him to the United States. My father's dream since he was a young child was to go to the United States, a land where the "streets were paved with gold" and there was an abundance of food and opportunity to pursue his dreams. In Korea, he didn't really have a place he could call home, and it would have been extremely difficult for him to climb up in society.

He readily accepted and landed in the United States with the dream of one day opening up his own business. He started working for Volkswagen and then for the Ford Motor Company as a mechanic, then went back to Korea for a few years, where he met my mother. They were married and both immigrated to the United States. Through hard work and the grace of God, my father fulfilled his lifelong dream by eventually owning his own auto mechanic shop.

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Life in the United States was not as easy as he thought, however. When he first immigrated to the United States, he went to the supermarket and bought a can of breadcrumbs with a picture of fried chicken on the front. He was so ecstatic because he did not know fried chicken was so cheap and easy to eat! He hurriedly went home and eagerly opened the can, only to peer in and see bread crumbs staring back at him. He saved money, ate fast food and lived in a small apartment. He also regularly attended church and found a sense of community there. While life was not easy, he was always very grateful to God for the opportunity to immigrate to the United States, and he did everything he could to express his thanks by raising his children to love God, serving in the church and giving back to his community.

My father has a deep, abiding love of this country grounded in the opportunities he was given when he first arrived. During his citizenship interview, the interviewing officer commended my father for his hard work ethic and his easy grasp of English, saying he was a model immigrant and that the United States was proud to have people like him here. My father has never missed a day of work and uses his auto mechanic services to help those in need in the community. He still loves journalism and writes frequently for the local Korean newspaper, and he is a well-respected leader in his church and among his friends.

While the immigrant experience of my father is a story I share often with friends and colleagues, I also grew up in the United States having to form my identity as a full American, born and bred in this country, yet with a cultural background and appearance distinct from the dominant culture. I was not an immigrant myself but grew up in an immigrant home where the hardships my parents endured to “make it” in this country formed my personal identity and my faith in Christ. Growing up as a minority, I wondered whether people would ever just think of me as an American without having my appearance predispose them to think I was a “foreigner.” In fact, in order to fit in, I didn’t want to learn the Korean language growing up and struggled with whether to be proud of my Korean heritage. Even though I speak English fluently, love American

football and have been educated here, people are surprised sometimes that I can speak English as well as I can, and they have often asked me “where are you *really* from?”

The political debate over immigration in the United States was not something to which I paid particular attention until later in life. While in college, I had studied migration issues at a macrolevel and always had a general interest in immigration due to my background. When I studied and worked in Madrid, Spain, I realized that immigration affects not just the United States but other industrialized countries, too, as their populations age and as migrants take jobs traditionally occupied by their native workforce.

I started working at World Relief on advocacy for refugee and immigration issues. I had my own reservations and initial misgivings about why the system was so broken in the first place and how it had even come to this point. My advocacy work in Washington, D.C., dispelled much of the misinformation I had previously believed.

More important, my work exposed me to the human side of the story. Stories of undocumented immigrants who had no way to regularize their status yet had been here for over ten years working in the same job, or of family members who were initially here legally yet were separated for long periods due to processing delays, softened my heart and mind to investigate the issue further. Living in Baltimore, I knew that a growing immigrant population there was challenging the traditional ideas and expectations of what the city should “look like,” and I knew this issue was affecting not just Baltimore but communities all across America and throughout the world. I realized more and more as I studied immigration how truly broken the system was and what role the church could play by bringing to light the human aspects of an issue mired in numbers and politics.

I also realized that immigration issues and immigrants themselves were never going to go away. If the church does not respond now, it will eventually have to respond in one way or another. Will our response be one that we can look back on a century later and say we were proud to

have taken? We must, as God's stewards, respond in a way that is based on facts and reflects God's justice and compassion. World Relief's position in the immigration debate grew out of its work with immigrants in the United States, and it was through this position that I grew to have a deeper understanding of the issue beyond the rhetoric.

Charting the Course

Through this book, we will attempt to put a human face on the immigration issue by introducing you to a number of immigrants and refugees, many of whom have become our friends. It is easy to forget, when talking about a complex issue like immigration, rife with competing statistics used liberally by both sides of the debate, that we are essentially talking about human beings, each one made in God's image. C. S. Lewis reminds us that each human being—the foreign born certainly not excluded—is an immortal being with a destiny much greater than this life alone, and in this sense is “the holiest object presented to your senses.”⁴ Our faith prohibits us from seeing any person as anything less than human and therefore sacred.

The terminology we use in English to refer to foreigners is quite unhelpful for keeping the uniqueness and sacredness of humanity in our minds. According to the dictionary, the language of our immigration laws, and even some translations of the Bible, it is entirely proper to refer to a person from another country as an *alien*, and no disrespect is inherently intended. Yet the fact that the term is now more commonly used to describe an extraterrestrial means that our minds go to Hollywood-induced images of three-headed green Martians when we hear about aliens, not to human beings with families and faith, made in God's image just like ourselves.

We prefer to refer to people as “undocumented” rather than “illegal.” We do not deny that it is illegal to enter the United States without a valid visa and inspection, nor do we condone any illegal activity. However, while entry without inspection (or overstaying a temporary visa) is illegal, this does not define the person's identity. Many of us have broken a law at

one time or another (we can both confess to having sped down the highway on more than one occasion), but if a single (or even, in the case of our speeding, repeated) act were to define our identity, we would probably all be “illegals.” Such terminology, in common usage, lumps immigrants—whose entering or overstaying unlawfully usually does not require any malicious intent—with criminals like murderers, rapists and kidnapers. It is too easy to dehumanize such immigrants when we lump them with such unsavory characters.* So, rather than referring to people as illegal aliens, we have generally opted to refer to people as undocumented immigrants throughout this text.

The next chapter will, we hope, help us recapture the human element of the immigration dilemma, focusing on who immigrants and refugees are, why they come to our country and how they are received when they get here. We particularly focus on the 11 to 12 million people who have no legal right to be present, as they, even more than immigrants who are here legally, bear most of the ill will stirred up by the immigration debate, and are probably the most likely to be dismissed as different from ourselves.

In chapter three, we present a concise history of our nation’s immigration history—from the earliest settlers to Ellis Island to the new waves of immigrants that began to reach our shores after the last major immigration reform was passed in 1965. We cannot adequately understand the current situation without understanding what has occurred in the past. In particular, we want to look at where our churches have been on this complex issue—which, as it does today, has always stirred passions.

In chapter four, drawing on Matthew’s experience as an immigration counselor, we explain our current immigration legal system—one that is quite complex and that can be difficult to understand even for those who work with it day-to-day. A basic understanding of how our immigration laws work (and do not work) today is crucial if we are to understand why

*That said, even murderers, rapists and kidnapers are made in the image of God, so we should not dehumanize them either.

so many people have come to the United States illegally.

Chapter five takes a step back and examines immigration from a biblical and theological perspective, reviewing the many immigrants in Scripture and what the Bible has to say about interacting with immigrants. While we will, of course, not find a specific prescription for U.S. immigration policy spelled out in the Bible, we can certainly identify principles that help us ascertain how God would have us, as followers of Christ, address this complex topic. Above all, we suggest that the ethic of loving our neighbor—including the immigrant and refugee—is central to God’s desire for us as we wrestle with this issue.

In chapter six, we address many of the most common concerns about immigration—both legal and illegal—including those from a Christian perspective. In particular, we focus on the apparent dilemma between wanting to welcome immigrants as Scripture commands us and following and upholding the laws, which is also a biblical mandate.

Chapter seven considers the impact of immigration on our country. We examine the U.S. economy and show how many industries depend on immigrant labor. We also present immigration from a global perspective, so the reader can gain a broader understanding of how it is affecting not just the United States but also many countries throughout the world.

Chapter eight provides a summary of the proposals that have been considered in recent years to deal with immigration. Drastically different ideas have been debated in the U.S. Congress, from mass deportation and criminalization to amnesty for all. What have come closer to becoming law—though there have been no major changes as of this writing—are compromise bills that include both stricter border enforcement as well as an earned legalization for at least some of the undocumented, requiring them to pay a fine and meet other criteria in order to receive their legal status. We draw on Jenny’s experience in representing World Relief’s position in Washington as we walk through the most recent policy proposals.

In chapter nine, we examine how many of the churches and denominations in our country—particularly those of the evangelical persuasion with which we both identify—are approaching the immigration di-

lemma. Many of the major streams of Christianity—both Protestant and Catholic, evangelical and liberal mainline—have put forth some sort of statement on immigration, and we can learn much from the thoughtful theological reasoning contained in these. We will also examine how immigration is changing the church itself in America today and what this means for how the church should respond to immigrants.

Finally, chapter ten provides some suggestions for moving forward. There are many responses: by serving and getting to know our immigrant neighbors through volunteering; by advocating for more just governmental policies; by educating our churches and communities; and by addressing the larger structural issues that lead to poverty, war and environmental disasters in other countries and thus to the waves of immigration that we face today.

We hope that you will be convinced—not necessarily of which policy to support, but at least, as a follower of Christ, that we each are called to love and serve our foreign-born neighbors. Appendixes at the end of the book provide resources for getting started in this process.

We expect that we have readers looking at this immigration dilemma from a wide range of perspectives. We may have already offended some of you just in the first chapter, as immigration is a highly charged topic. Our sincere prayer is that you will continue to journey with us to explore these difficult questions, and that each of us, personally and corporately as the church, would seek God's heart on this issue. To begin, we need to understand who the immigrants at the center of this controversy *are*, which is the topic of the next chapter.