

Immigration as threat and opportunity

By [William Yoo](#)

February 9, 2016

The subject of immigration engenders contentious debate, complex discussion, and conniving diatribe among Americans. Four years ago, the mother of a recently elected Republican senator implored her son to be [compassionate in his legislative work on the issue](#). She reminded him of their own family's journey from central Cuba to south Florida and noted that undocumented immigrants—she called them *los pobrecitos*, “poor things”—are human beings seeking dignity, work, and a better future just like they were.

One wonders if Marco Rubio remembers his mother's message as he competes with a presidential candidate who uses the promise of building a border wall as an [applause line](#)—in a party where a majority of members regard immigrants as a deleterious [threat to American society](#).

American Christians are also divided on immigration. A 2014 [study](#) found that more than 70 percent of Christians supported reforms to allow undocumented immigrants to “stay legally if they met certain requirements,” but fewer than half thought it was very important for the government to pass “significant immigration legislation” immediately. Yet Protestant leaders and organizations across evangelical and mainline traditions have shared a commitment to frame the politics of immigration reform morally and theologically.

In 2012, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) [affirmed](#) the biblical mandate to provide hospitality to and seek justice for immigrants regardless of status. The same year, the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod [stated](#) that an immigrant's “legal or illegal status cannot be a prerequisite for the church's concern about the basic dignity of aliens and their families as God's creatures.” These two denominations disagree on the ordination of women, the doctrine of Holy Scripture as the Word of God, human sexuality, and many other beliefs and practices. Yet there is accord on the responsibility of Christians to treat all immigrants as fellow human beings made in the *imago Dei*.

Protestants throughout U.S. history have understood immigration in various ways. In the 19th century, popular Protestant attitudes vacillated between seeing immigrants as a peril to true Christian faith and targeting them for religious conversion.

In 1835, Presbyterian minister and seminary president Lyman Beecher railed against the dangerous “hive” of Catholic immigrants whose allegiance to Roman authority would ultimately undermine Protestants’ civil and religious liberties. After the inaugural [Parliament of the World’s Religions](#) at the 1893 World’s Fair in Chicago, some leading Protestants feared that the introduction of Asian religions, in the forms of Buddhist meditation and Hindu yoga, would lead people from their pews to idolatrous practices. Today, the word *illegal* is used as an invective term for undocumented immigrants. Back then, Protestants demeaned immigrants with words like *romish* and *heathen*.

Nineteenth-century Protestants regarded immigration not only as an unparalleled menace but also as a divinely ordered opportunity. In 1889, northern Presbyterians produced a report that both warned against “the great influx of Romanism” and discussed how to take advantage of the typical immigrant’s vulnerabilities for the purpose of evangelizing. Immigration was increasingly viewed as a new means for mission work that would supplement sending missionaries to distant lands. In Protestants’ minds, God was bringing “the ends of the earth” to their church doorsteps. The task was to convert immigrants in that tenuous moment when they first arrived, as they struggled to make sense of unfamiliar and hostile environs.

Today the vast majority of immigrants in America, documented and undocumented, are already Christian. Many are invigorating their denominations. Sociologist R. Stephen Warner observes that approximately 85 percent of post-1965 immigrants are non-European and at least two-thirds are Christian. The growth of Korean American members within the PCUSA and Latino/a American members within the Assemblies of God—and the ways in which these racial-ethnic minority groups enrich the church with new liturgical resources and diverse spiritual gifts—exemplify how immigration is transforming Christianity in America today.

Our Protestant history with immigrants is no less complex than the current political and religious discourses surrounding immigration reform. We must therefore meet the challenge with our complete attention and faithful action.

Author and literary critic J. Hillis Miller once discerned that “a story is a way of doing things with words. It makes something happen in the real world.” We continue to hear fearful and fanciful stories about immigration. But we also behold powerful and persuasive stories involving the revelation of God’s presence through the immigrants and *los pobrecitos* among us. What are the stories we tell about immigration? And more importantly, what are the consequences of these stories?

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