Strangers no longer

Much faith based reflection on the theme of refugees and migration focuses on the Biblical call to “welcome the stranger.” The stranger, by definition, is outside our community, set apart by different beliefs, customs, and ways of speaking. Often the stranger inspires fear. The Biblical call to welcome the stranger invites us to go beyond our mistrust and suspicion in order to welcome newcomers into our community.

But what happens when the stranger in our midst remains forever a stranger? People of colour, both new immigrants and Canadian born, are too often treated as if they don't belong. They face systemic barriers in accessing employment, housing and social services. They find themselves forever labeled as “immigrant” rather than Canadian. Even citizenship represents no more than a fragile hold on belonging. Mahar Arar, the Syrian-born Canadian deported to Syria on false allegations of terrorism, discovered that the rights of “strangers” are easily suspended in the name of national security.

The Bible clearly speaks against this kind of discrimination. In Leviticus, we read: “The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you” (Lev 19: 34). When we recognize the stranger as fellow citizen, then their well being is no longer seen as a matter of charity, but as a matter of rights and entitlement.

In order to truly welcome the stranger, we must recognize the stranger as one of us. The borders and barriers between “us” and “them” are merely human constructions that serve to justify exploitation and violence. The truth is that we are sisters and brothers, one people under God. Paul writes to the Ephesians: “So God came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near... So then, you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and members of the household of God” (Eph 2: 17,19).

Demographically, this is already true – migrants are not far off strangers but rather our neighbours. May it also be true in our hearts and in our practice, as we relate to migrants as full members of our communities.

Don't call me a stranger

Don't call me a stranger;
I need to feel at home;
Especially when loneliness cools my heart.

Don't call me a stranger;
The soil we step on is the same;
But mine is not “the promised land”

Don't call me a stranger;
The color of my passport is different;
But the color of our blood is the same;

Don't call me a stranger;
The language I speak sounds different,
But the feelings it expresses are the same.

Don't call me a stranger;
I toil and struggle in your land;
And the sweat of our brows is the same.

Don't call me a stranger;
Borders, we created them;
And the separation that results is the same.

Don't call me a stranger;
I am just your friend;
But you do not know me yet.

Don't call me a stranger;
We cry for justice and peace in different ways
But our God is the same.

Comboni Missionaries of the Heart of Jesus,
Philippines, 1995 (Abridged version)
**Migrant Sunday Liturgy**

**Call to Worship**

**Leader:** Peace to you who are far off  
**All:** Peace to you who are near  

**Leader:** Peace to the migrant  
**All:** Peace to the native born  

**Leader:** We are no longer strangers  
**All:** We are members of one body, one church, one household of God

**Prayer of Approach**

O God,  
Open our eyes to see the needs of migrants  
Open our ears to hear their cries for justice  
Open our hearts to assist sojourners near and far  
Show us where love, faith and hope are needed  
Use us as ministers of your healing  
Let us not be afraid to defend the weak  
because of the anger of the strong,  
Nor afraid to defend the poor  
because of the anger of the rich  
Sustain us in the coming days that we may be able  
to do some work of peace for thee. Amen

*United Methodist Committee on Relief*
*(based on a prayer from South Africa)*

**Hymn:** For the healing of the nations

**Prayer of Confession**

Why, O God,  
do our neighbours have to exhaust their strength  
to come work in our fields, care for our children,  
and build our homes?  

Why, O God,  
do we ask the most vulnerable to endure the  
hardship and abuses of work we will not do  
ourselves?  

Why, O God,  
do we allow the pursuit of profits  
to outweigh our sense of fairness?  

O God, have mercy on us.

*Based on a prayer from National farm worker ministry, US.*

**Readings**

Leviticus 19: 1-2, 9, 33-34  
Ephesians 2:14-22  
Matthew 25: 31-35

**Sermon:** No longer strangers

Use the reflection on the reverse of this fact sheet as a starting point for a sermon about welcoming migrants as full members of our communities.

**Prayer of Intercession**

Jesus, full of love and mercy, watch over our sister and brother migrants. Have compassion and protect them as they suffer mistreatment and humiliation along their way, as they encounter distrust and marginalization. Touch with your goodness the hearts of all those who see them pass by. Help us to respect them and treat them with dignity.

Take care of their families until they return home. Grant them the grace to return safely, not with broken hearts but with their hopes fulfilled.

"Prayer on the wall of the Community Centre for Migrants in Altar, Mexico"

**Hymn:** In Christ there is no East or West

**Offering**

As we present our offerings, we also offer ourselves to the work of justice for migrants everywhere. We remember the words of Mexican-American migrant rights activist Cesar Chavez:

“What do we want the church to do? We ask for its presence with us, beside us, as Christ among us. We ask the church to sacrifice with the people for social change, for justice and for love of brother and sister. We don’t ask for words. We ask for deeds.”

**Hymn:** What does the Lord require?

**Sending:**

Loving God, as you send us into the world you love to build our futures together, give us grace to go thankfully and with courage in the power of your Spirit. Amen

*National Council of Churches in Australia*