



United
Methodist
Women

FAITH • HOPE • LOVE IN ACTION

Office of the General Secretary
475 Riverside Drive, 15th floor
New York, NY 10115
www.unitedmethodistwomen.org

The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

June 16, 2014

Dear President Obama,

United Methodist Women has joined you in mobilizing for immigration reform. We share your urgency for Congress to act on this reform. We also value your administration's attention to a child refugee crisis on our southern border as young people flee violence in Central America, despite intense calls by some in Congress to return children to that violence. But I write to you today to express our deep concern about your decision to postpone a Homeland Security deportation enforcement review in hopes that House Republicans might yet take action on immigration reform this year.

Over two million deportations during your administration have not convinced the House to take action and will not do so now. Detention and deportations create intense hardships for immigrant families and communities. The administration's current policies sow fear, divide families, leave children without parents and penalize the very people whom immigration policies seek to help. Along with faith leaders from across the theological spectrum, we deplore what seems to be the current course of the administration of using people and families as tools to increase pressure on Congress. Your policy of deportations must end now. We cannot play politics with people's lives.

On President's Day this year I made the prayerful decision to participate in an act of civil disobedience at the White House. We gathered outside the White House to pray and give witness in an attempt to convey to your administration that the current detention and deportation policy is immoral and must end. I joined in protest United Methodist Women colleagues, other faith leaders and two women whose spouses face deportation. One of the women, Pilar, runs a small business in Pennsylvania with her husband, Israel. Their business was raided early this year due to an informant, and Israel was detained. The family lost its livelihood, and Pilar's small children are left without a father. An Evangelical colleague told me that one of their pastors went to a detention center to visit a parishioner and was himself detained. This is a system that has run amok.

Leaders of United Methodist Women did not come to the decision to commit civil disobedience on President's Day lightly or suddenly. We have been deeply engaged in advocacy for immigrant and civil rights since 2006. We have worked for just immigration legislation—the only lasting solution to the current humanitarian crisis. We have visited the White House and congressional leaders. We have mobilized in the streets with immigrant communities. We have visited the Department of Homeland Security,

presenting thousands of postcards from our members across the country calling for changes in current enforcement policies. We have advocated in state capitols. We have offered hospitality, legal assistance, detention visitation, scholarships, community service programs and accompaniment to immigrant families. At the core of these efforts is the affirmation of the dignity and rights of each person, a commitment to family unity and special concern for women, youth and children. We have consistently called for an end to the detention and deportation of immigrants due to their immigration status. (See highlights attached.)

In September 2010, I met personally with Beth Gibson, Andrew Straight and Molly Groom at Immigration and Customs Enforcement headquarters. We brought documented cases of detentions resulting from minor infractions such as traffic violations and asked the staff to engage in a system-wide policy change. I was assured that these were local irregularities, not ICE policy, and was invited to instead bring individual cases to ICE's attention. I challenged that approach then and continue to do so now. There is clear evidence of a system-wide policy and practice of detaining and deporting immigrants merely due to their status. According to a *New York Times* review of cases, since you took office, "two-thirds of the nearly two million deportation cases involve people who had committed minor infractions, including traffic violations, or had no criminal record at all" (*New York Times*, April 6, 2014).

Subsequently we met with Felicia Escobar and ICE officials at the White House in 2012 (as a part of the United Methodist Immigration Task Force) to share priorities for legislation and call for an end to current enforcement policies, particularly Secure Communities, the Criminal Alien program and Operation Streamline. Executive branch officials have repeatedly told us that this is a legislative issue, yet your bold and courageous action regarding DREAM students and climate change demonstrate that you can make significant changes with the stroke of a pen. We were heartened by your reference to this authority in the State of the Union address. Why not exercise it in favor of all immigrants?

In 2013 we met with Senator Schumer and others who crafted the Senate bill as well as with the offices of Congressman Goodlatte, Congressman Boehner, Congresswoman Pelosi and others. Yet when Senate Bill 744 passed in June 2013 it contained provisions that would commit the United States to a massive expansion of immigration enforcement and militarization of the U.S.–Mexico border. Despite many positive elements, we found the bill unjust, unfair and unwise. United Methodist Women rejects the disciplinary nature of SB744 and proposals in the House of Representatives.

Rather than blaming and criminalizing immigrants for coming to the United States we must address the causes of migration through development, trade, economic and foreign policies. Human rights and racial justice must be at the core of both U.S. economic and immigration policy. The flawed Senate bill and much more flawed House proposals do not offer the kind of immigration reform we urgently need, and they are certainly not worth delaying review of the administrations' current policies regarding detention and deportation.

As a national faith-based women's organization of some 800,000 members, United Methodist Women is led by a biblical mandate to treat everyone as sisters and brothers, as God's children with inherent worth. Detention and deportation undermine peoples' rights and dignity. We act on our faith and on United Methodist Church policy, which urges members to **"call the United States government to immediately cease all arrests, detainment, and deportations of undocumented immigrants**, including children, solely based upon their immigration status until a fair and comprehensive immigration reform is passed" (*The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church 2012, #3281*).

We implore you to take the actions the White House can implement now, including directives to stop detaining and deporting people simply because of their immigration status and mechanisms to provide provisional status until a legalization bill becomes law. The bills under discussion in Congress *would not address the deportation crisis*—they would intensify it. Instead, you can and should take action *now* to stop dividing families. United Methodist Women will continue to mobilize and advocate with immigrant sisters and brothers, both for just immigration legislation that does not expand enforcement efforts and for Obama Administration action to stop detentions and deportations. We urge you to review ICE procedures now, not later, and to expand provisional status.

Sincerely,

Harriett Jane Olson
General Secretary and CEO

cc: Cecilia Muñoz, Director, White House Domestic Policy Council; Jeh Johnson, Secretary of Homeland Security

United Methodist Women Advocacy for Immigrant Rights

United Methodist Women has offered service and advocacy for immigrant rights for the past nine years through its Immigrant and Civil Rights Initiative, with a particular concern for women, youth and children and family unity. We have studied, marched, prayed and lobbied. We have met with the White House and Homeland Security and members of Congress and have focused on state capitols across the country. Here are some highlights of our engagement:

- In 2006, United Methodist Women joined tens of thousands in the streets to oppose the Sensenbrenner bill. In 2008, United Methodist Women held vigil at the Varick Street, New York, detention center and affirmed that no one should be in prison for being an immigrant. In 2010, United Methodist Women led a march and rally of some 3,000 in St. Louis, Missouri, calling for an end to racial profiling in detention enforcement and to Secure Communities.
- In 2010, United Methodist Women members across the country joined a rolling fast and advocated in support of the DREAM Act. Dozens of prayer vigils included screening of *Jasmine's Story*, about a United Methodist family ripped apart by detention and deportation.
- In 2010 and 2011, United Methodist Women rallied in Phoenix to challenge Arizona's SB1070 and joined faith leaders in Birmingham, Alabama, to challenge HB56. We held legislative events in South Carolina, Iowa, Missouri and elsewhere calling on state legislators to enact laws that welcome immigrants.
- In 2012, United Methodist Women passed policy addressing the "Criminalization of Communities of Color in the United States" (www.unitedmethodistwomen.org/news/gc2012-criminalization-of-communities-of-color-in). Members across the country are reading Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow* as part of our Reading Program. We organized a rally in Tampa in 2012 at our denomination's General Conference affirming "Profit from Pain Is Inhumane" and "Dignity, Not Detention" (www.umc.org/news-and-media/gc2012-500-protest-private-prison-industry).
- In 2012, members across the country explored *Immigration and the Bible* as a spiritual growth study, reading about biblical leaders who were forced to migrate due to political fears and persecution, drought, flood and other factors. This has led to both advocacy for legislation reform and engagement with local immigrant families through detention visitation, free legal clinics, rallies in response to raids, and accompaniment of families dealing with detention and deportation.
- In 2013, we visited legislators in our communities and on Capitol Hill pushing for just immigration reform. Despite many positive aspects of SB 744, we found the bill unjust, unfair and unwise (www.unitedmethodistwomen.org/news/senate-immigration-bill-unfair,-unjust,-unwise).
- In February 2014, United Methodist Women joined the United Methodist Immigration Task Force, ecumenical leaders and the National Day Laborer's Organizing Network in civil disobedience at the White House, calling for the Obama Administration to end deportations now.



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