

# Bearing God's Image to All People: A Social Worker's Response to the Sojourner

Lori Goss-Reaves, Lena Shankar Crouso & Erin M. Lefdahl-Davis

*A Christian's response to migration and refugee resettlement is shaped by a belief in the Triune God, who reconciles all people to Himself. When we accept that we are all sojourners, awaiting our final home in heaven, our treatment of the sojourner changes. Christian social workers are called to be transformed by Christ, which creates motivation for reconciliation that is inclusive and love-filled. This article explores a Christian social worker's response to all of God's people, focused specifically on the immigrant, migrant, and refugee. Drawing on the the social work code of ethics, Biblical truth, and Emma Lazarus' sonnet on the Statue of Liberty, practical implications are made for those responding to people in need. Social workers are at the forefront of mezzo work in communities. Their training also makes them well-suited to champion advocacy for the immigrant at the macro and micro levels.*

*Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,  
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;  
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand  
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame  
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name  
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand  
Glow world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command  
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.  
"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she  
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor;*

*Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"*

Emma Lazarus' sonnet, *New Colossus*, also known as the "Statue of Liberty poem," has been widely quoted and closely associated with the Statue of Liberty (Lazarus, 2002). The words, inscribed on a plaque mounted with distinction at the statue's base, provide insight and wisdom to a world in need (Sutherland, 2003). The sonnet's famous line, "Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free," is held up as the beacon of America's welcoming shores. These words describe the beckoning plea for those without a home to come freely, readily and honorably, into this land. Through this invitational entry message into America, we find a nation formed from immigrants.

It is often assumed that the United States is committed to immigrant hospitality because, as a nation, we welcomed different people groups from various places in the world. This notion has been challenged by others who propose that Americans at times have shown hostility (Behdad, 2005). Regardless of how our nation is perceived, a Christian social worker's response to the immigrant is shaped by the Triune God who loves unconditionally. Guided by the Holy Spirit, Christians are called to reach out to all people with compassion and love (Schmidt, n.d.). The Christian social worker's call to service is congruent with the desire to faithfully follow Christ (Ressler, 2002). According to the NASW Code of Ethics, social workers are instructed to serve all people groups regardless of ethnicity, morality, or sexual orientation (NASW, 2008). Furthermore, the reality of our identity is one that is congruent with a larger ideal of the Kingdom of God as a place where people from "every nation, tribe, people and language" can live together in peace and harmony (Rev. 7:9, New International Version).

### **The Land of Liberty**

"Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free" are well-known words that have become synonymous for what we honor as the very fiber of the United States of America (Lazarus, 2002). American culture is a 'melting pot' of cultures and identities, and those ideals expressed in Lazarus' sonnet on the Statue of Liberty propose freedom for all in this 'land of liberty.' This invitation to equality and justice for all is a part of American history and penned in Article I of the Constitution of the United States (Somin, 2017). However, American history also bears witness to the reality that not all people have been

extended the same liberties in the United States, and inequality is still present for minority groups such as immigrants, migrants and refugees.

The Bible also upholds ideals that parallel the inspiration for hospitality and social justice found in Lazarus' sonnet. One of the parables shared by Jesus stirs our hearts and minds with these words:

“For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me” (Matthew 25:35-36, New International Version).

Lady Liberty invited those who were hungry and displaced to a geographic freedom, but Jesus invited his disciples into a new way, allegiance to God, which would compel them to serve those in need. As Christian social workers, our loyalty is rooted to God's love for all those created in the image of God, which includes all humanity, especially those in need. As those who belong to Christ, we have a new membership and citizenship, which includes loyalty towards all those who are “hungry...thirsty...a stranger...needing clothes...sick...in prison,” who reflect the presence of Christ in the world (Matthew 25:35-36, New International Version).

### **God's Family**

In the Bible we find this declaration,

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has gone, the new has come. All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting men's sins against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Corinthians 5:17-21, English Standard Version).

Our familial belonging as one of God's children is an identity that demands a new way of life. Because of the mercy and grace of Christ, and through the Holy Spirit, we can be enthralled with compassion and a natural, habitual compulsion to a pure and holy love. As Christians, we have a dual citizenship, first to the Kingdom of God, and then to the nation where

we reside. Without understanding and awareness of this dual citizenship, Christians might hold themselves to a nationalistic allegiance and miss the new found belonging to a kingdom culture predicated on a glorious freedom that comes from a Christ-centered culture, where all humans are treated with equality, justice and dignity.

Once aware of this Kingdom citizenship, Christians begin to realize that this freedom was also given to us because as we ourselves are also strangers and aliens in this world; we now inhabit this world as incarnate beings and not as mere earthly beings. Those who believe in an eternal Kingdom are invited to see ourselves as “foreigners and exiles” on the earth, living in a way that points to a heavenly homeland (1 Peter 2:10-12, John 18:36, NIV). This newfound revelation leads to the expression and responsive compulsion of a holy, compassionate love. Once they know their own identity as members of God’s household, Christians are able to love others with the same generosity and hospitality. It flows with a habitual, boundless love that cannot be contained, offering to all people the very dignity God offers us. We are called to the same purpose, among all peoples, to be the incarnate, restorative, and redemptive way of Jesus Christ. This is our patriotism now, and we are patriots of that citizenship. As those who were welcomed regardless of their former way of life, Christians can resist a political ideological gospel, or a cloistered, isolated gospel. Both fall short of the embodied, embracing gospel of the Trinitarian God.

### **A Holy Love**

From Matthew 25 we can understand what this compulsion of service and hospitality looks like, and what the implications are if Christians miss the mark of this new way of love.

Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?” The King will reply, “I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.” Then he will say to those on his left, “Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.” They also will answer, “Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing

clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?" He will reply, "I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me." Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life. (Matthew 25:35-46, NIV)

As we compare and contrast Lazarus' sonnet with these Scriptural passages, we see the divine urgency in the call for Christians to embody a holy love that transcends time, space, and place. Just as Emma Lazarus gives Lady Liberty's words to the "tired, poor and huddled masses," God urges us to acknowledge and meet the needs of our fellow humans who, through such injustices as persecution, oppression, war-torn separation, gender brutalization, and tyrannical political ideologies, find their way to our shores and borders.

Christian social workers have an additional responsibility as image bearers, as they are in the unique position of authority to directly impact the lives of the "tired, poor and huddled masses," those who are oppressed, and those in need who fit the description in Matthew 25 of having practical and significant need. Through culturally competent intervention, having knowledge, awareness and skills that can meet specific needs and advocate for others, social workers influence change in social structures that perpetuate inequality (Potocky-Tripodi, 2002). Christian social workers represent Christ through their actions, by loving in practical ways both with and without words. Those entering our country through immigration come with pasts often laden with trauma. The need for advocacy is great. The call for love is paramount.

### **A Human Issue**

The immigrant and the refugee are not new identities within God's created beings. These groups have been defined as people who were born in one country and relocated to another (Potocky-Tripodi, 2002). The difference is that one group left voluntarily while the other was forced out when their human rights were somehow violated. Those who are refugees have fled due to a lack of safety, the inability to provide for their families and protect their children, and the very real fear of death, disease or destitution. The plight of refugees and the existence of immigrants at this point in history is a reality that has been brought to the forefront by mass media reporting, but it is not new. The movement of people into regions, territories, and land masses existed from the very first movement of Adam and Eve out from the Garden into new lands. As this migration continued through the Abrahamic land journey, Noah's flood journey, and the conquering of tribes and nations over centuries, people have inhabited the land and invaded the land. Acknowledging this truth may help us, as Christians, to see that

this is a real and perpetual social issue, and that God, in His Trinitarian holistic goodness, cares about His humanity.

As Christians, we find our new citizenship and see that this land is filled with an abundance of Kingdom citizens that form the body of Christ. Wherever we are located, in the place we call our earthly home, we can now live out our Kingdom conviction and compulsion to love. So, what is it we are compelled to do as image bearers of Christ, as ambassadors of the One who came to redeem all humanity? What is the particular, embodied divine work of faith communities in the lives of immigrants and refugees? We have the rightful and honorable invitation from God to participate in the work of reconciliation. God is intricately and deliberately engaged with all people and their holistic needs, and faith communities are a conduit for the ongoing incarnation of this holy love and liberating life. Christian social workers, as professionals who are trained in specific intervention and advocacy skills, are in the fortunate position to do the same.

### **Core Social Work Values**

It is critical that Christian social workers integrate their own values with the values of the profession. Three of the core values of the social work profession apply directly to our work with the sojourner, or those who are displaced. The commitment to social justice, the dignity and worth of the individual, and the importance of human relationships must all be considered when interacting with client systems at the micro, macro, and mezzo level (NASW, 2017, 2008). Relationships and communities that are intercultural, restorative, and reconciled have the hope of being redemptive, striving to reflect and bear God's image in the world. Faith communities and Christian social workers must decide to do the difficult work of embracing diversity, promoting equity, and fighting injustice with diligence, authenticity, and examination. In order to do this, we must first recognize that our identity lies fully and centrally in Christ. We must tap into our capacity to yield to the power of the Holy Spirit in humble adoration and to see others through the godly lens of mercy, grace and love, which is a birthright of our Kingdom identity.

The values of our faith speak to our work as social workers. A Kingdom identity seeks out the work of God in the needs of the world, and the identity of a Christian social worker embraces the professional core values of service, social justice, the dignity and worth of the person, the importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence (NASW, 2017). As dual citizens (of earth and heaven), we can integrate these identities and function effectively in these transformative values in our work, as well as in His workmanship.

The following are some of the distinctive Kingdom values that Christian social workers can know, experience, and live out freely as we

embody our own liberation through Christ:

- God created all people in the image of God; therefore, people are created sacred. We can acknowledge and believe that all people are worthy of dignity and humane love.
- God is at work to bring His Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. We can recognize that issues of human rights and inequity are an invitation to God's grace by which we can cooperate with God's work to reconcile all people to Himself through the gospel message.
- God intends and expects justice. We must—and ought to—defend the cause of the powerless, marginalized, oppressed, and disenfranchised, and advocate and offer rightful agency to all peoples.
- Christ's love for us compels us to love our neighbor. We must engage in kindness, compassion, and invitation to the stranger, widow, orphan, and those in need or subjected to inequities and injustices.
- Grace abounds in and through Jesus Christ. We will seek to understand without judgment and offer patience and peace to those we serve, so they might receive God's transformational love freely.
- Christians are compelled by the greatest commandments to "love the Lord your God" and to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:29, NIV). We strive to live in perfected holy love with God and offer this unconditional love to others and each other.
- Christians have an eternal citizenship in the Kingdom that transcends earthly locations. We can and ought to submit to God's Kingdom authority and to His two greatest commandments, while also honoring earthly laws whenever possible.
- The Great Commission delivers the good news of freedom and new life. We are to follow Christ's example to make disciples of all peoples by declaring good news of freedom, life and love.

### **Culturally Competent Social Work and Kingdom Values**

The social work profession has the capacity to make a great impact on our nation through policy, advocacy, and practice (Healy, 2008). Social work graduates trained in cultural competence are equipped with the knowledge and passion needed to speak on behalf of those who cannot speak for themselves due to language barriers and oppression. Christian social workers bear the image of Christ in their personal and professional lives, and are often called to bridge social, cultural and international differences. The values of God's Kingdom and of social work can work together to create a personal and professional advocacy during the work to meet the needs of

diverse people groups, including immigrants, refugees and all who sojourn. A quest to deeply love all people can be enacted through personal contact and service, as well as lobbying for a change in a system that is broken.

The Bible is filled with verses that command God's people to welcome the sojourner. The Israelites knew what it was like to be aliens and unwelcomed, and they were told, "You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Deuteronomy 10:19, New King James Version). In Leviticus, this mandate was extended to a complete welcoming of the sojourner: "The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt: I am the Lord your God" (Leviticus 19:34, N IV).

Nash, Wong, and Trlin (2006) provide insight into the ways social workers can use their skill set to help immigrants and refugees. At the macro level, this involves a focus on advocacy, social justice, and the rights of all humans. Mezzo work includes working with the community to ensure that adequate resources are available, accessible, and affordable. Individual work is done at the micro level to help individuals deal with past trauma and loss. Family needs are addressed at this level as well as helping individuals feel safe and healthy on an emotional and physical level. All of these practical ways of meeting human need can be motivated by divine love, embodying Kingdom values and honoring God's commandments, as we work in practical ways as Christian social workers.

### **Conclusion**

The NASW Code of Ethics states that "the mission of the social work profession is to enhance the well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of all people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty" (NASW, 2017; 2008, p.1). Working to reduce and prevent psychological harm for immigrants is a heritage of the social work profession's history (Chang-Muy & Congress, 2008). It is a critical time in our country to stand up for the rights of those who are rejected because they were not born in the United States. As Christian social workers embody the love of God, they become a conduit for acceptance, inclusion, and positive societal change. This is done through hospitality, practical advocacy, and the reconciliation of diverse individuals, groups and cultures.

The writer of Colossians defines reconciliation in this way: "Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior, but now He has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you as holy in His sight, without blemish and free from accusation" (Colossians 1:21-22, NIV). When we live out a life of reconciliation, those who were once enemies become friends (McGee, 2003). That is the desired response to the sojourner as we call on social workers to lead the way.

## References

- Behdad, A. (2005). *A forgetful nation: On immigration and cultural identity in the United States*. Duke University Press.
- Chang-Muy, F., & Congress, E. (Eds.). (2009). *Social work with immigrants and refugees*. New York, NY: Springer Publishing Company.
- Healy, L. (2008). *International social work: Professional action in an interdependent world*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Lazarus, E. (2002). *Emma Lazarus: Selected poems and other writings*. (G. Eiselein Ed.) Ontario, Canada: Broadview Press.
- McGee, R. (2003). *The search for significance*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc.
- Nash, M., Wong, J., & Trlin, A. (2006). Civic and social integration: A new field of social work practice with immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers. *International Social Work*, 49(3), 345-363.
- National Association of Social Workers. (2008). *Guide to everyday professional conduct of social workers*. Washington, DC: NASW.
- National Association of Social Workers. (2017). Preamble to the code of ethics. Retrieved Jan 20, 2018, from <https://www.socialworkers.org/About/Ethics/Code-of-Ethics/Code-of-Ethics>
- Potocky-Tripodi, M. (2002). *Best practices for social work with refugees & immigrants*. New York, NY: Colombia University Press.
- Ressler, L. (2002). When social work and Christianity conflict. In Beryl Hugen & T. Laine Scales, (Eds.), *Christianity and Social Work: Readings on the Integration of Christian Faith and Social Work Practice*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (pp.93-117). Botsford, CT: North American Association of Christians in Social Work.
- Schmidt, W. (N.D.). Wesleyan view of immigration. Retrieved from <https://www.wesleyan.org/237/a-wesleyan-view-of-immigration>.
- Somin, Ilya. (2017). Immigration, freedom, and the constitution. *Harvard Journal of Law and Public Policy*, 40(1), p. 1-7.
- Sutherland, C. (2003). *The statue of liberty*. New York, NY: Barnes and Noble Publishing.

**Lori Goss-Reaves**, DSW, LCSW, MSW, ACSW, is an associate professor of social work and Director of Field Placement at Indiana Wesleyan University, 4201 South Washington Street, Marion, IN 46952, Phone: (765) 677-2167. Email: [Lori.Reaves@indwes.edu](mailto:Lori.Reaves@indwes.edu).

**Lena Shankar Crouso**, MEd, EdS, DCC is Dean, Office of Intercultural Learning and Engagement, Indiana Wesleyan University, 4201 South Washington Street, Marion, Indiana 46953, Phone: (740)502-9059. Email: [Lena.Crouso@indwes.edu](mailto:Lena.Crouso@indwes.edu).

**Erin M. Lefdahl-Davis**, PhD, MA, MTS is an associate professor of Graduate Counseling at Indiana Wesleyan University, 4201 South Washington Street, Marion, Indiana 46953, Phone: (765) 677-2823. Email: [Erin.Davis@indwes.edu](mailto:Erin.Davis@indwes.edu).

**Keywords:** restoration, Christian social worker, immigrant, refugee, migrant