



**BECOMING AN
IMMIGRANT WELCOMING
CONGREGATION**

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

Becoming an Immigrant Welcoming Congregation



The Journey is Made by Walking

The United Church of Christ has a long history of working in the fields of justice. One of our strongest justice endeavors has been standing with our lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender sisters and brothers and advocating their full inclusion in church and society through the Open and Affirming process. The Open and Affirming process is an experience that is filled with education, breaking down stereo-types and getting to know, through face to face encounters, the struggles and suffering of our LGBTQ brothers and sisters. The Open and Affirming process has transformed many members and churches and has helped them connect and be engaged in a real justice issue of our day.

Somewhere along the way of walking toward justice the church and its people have also found other areas where church and society needs to broaden the circle of inclusion. Immigration is one of those areas that have cried out to members and churches to get involved. In the early 1990's with the abrupt change from a National economy to a Global Economy, communities across the country began to experience a wave of immigration that has challenged the U.S. Society and left many with questions and concerns. Some congregations began to study the issue of immigration and learned of root causes, they studied the impact of the Global Economy and Free Trade.

Agreements, as well as learned about immigrant communities that were present in their cities and towns. Some of these congregations were led to offer direct service while others found different ways to be engaged and involved in the immigrant justice movement. It is amazing how walls and barriers are broken down when people meet face to face, when people become educated, and start looking for solutions.

It was through the endeavors of UCC local congregations and interfaith partners to welcome and organize alongside impacted immigrant members of our communities that the Immigrant Welcoming Congregation model was born.

The church has an important role in the immigration discussion. Our faith tradition and sacred texts are saturated with stories about immigrants. We have a special ability and calling to reach out and love the neighbor---all of our neighbors. But it takes education, face to face encounters, and an effort to engage the sensibilities of our faith. Churches and communities have been asking for a process much like the Open and Affirming process that would carefully help them study, engage, and encounter immigrants and the issues that they face. Ultimately the road to immigration reform at a legislative level will demand the broader education of congregations and communities across the country. Our goal with this study is to help your church be-come an "Immigrant Welcoming Congregation" that can be in solidarity with the immigrant issues in your community.

Becoming an Immigrant Welcoming Congregation:

The Journey toward becoming an Immigrant Welcoming Congregation involves multiple study and reflection sessions.

The issue of immigration has become one that defines what kind of society we will become and whether the politics of xenophobia and fear will succeed. Developing a reservoir of resources and knowledge for a congregation to make an informed decision takes thoughtful and diligent work. It is best to keep everyone engaged in the process and part of the dialogue. Church Councils, Boards of Directors and administrative bodies should be encouraged to attend the gatherings as should the youth and young adults. The programs should be aimed at the entire congregation rather than focusing just on a mission or outreach board. At the end of the process it is hoped that the congregation will affirm an “Immigrant Welcoming Congregation” statement that has been written by the congregation. To get to that point it is best to do the ground work and get as many people involved in the education process. As with the Open and Affirming process, it is important to develop a thorough process and then trust the people and the process--once people are engaged and educated things begin to fall into place. Here is a list of possible themes and study sessions.

We invite you to exploration and discernment. It is our conviction that each community which challenges itself to embrace the *Immigrant Welcoming* process is a community open to the dialogue God initiates within our current time and context. We also recognize that in each community, the nature of this dialogue will reflect that community’s unique relationship with God. For this reason, we do not present a one-size-fits-all process. We do not dictate what becoming *Immigrant Welcoming* looks like. Instead, we offer this document as a menu of activities, resources and suggestions which inform what the process *might look like* for your community.

Lastly, we offer ourselves as partners to your congregation as you engage in this discernment. This is our ministry. This is where we see our calling. We are open to learning and teaching, advising and listening, accompanying and cheering your community along on its journey towards affirming itself as *Immigrant Welcoming*. Our prayer is that on this journey we come to a greater understanding of that very abundance of life that we find together in Jesus.

The journey to solidarity can only happen by walking together with our sisters and brothers. Feel free to take these materials and ideas to build your congregation’s own process of becoming an “Immigrant Welcoming Congregation.” Remember to be creative, flexible and engaged. This toolkit has been formed with from the input of congregations doing this work on the ground.

WHAT IS THE NEXT FAITHFUL STEP?

In your discernment groups please consider if you think Countryside Community Church is ready to be committed to being an Immigrant Welcoming Congregation. Discern what roll you think the church has in the immigration discussion. In your small groups you can discuss what it would mean to welcome and organize alongside impacted immigrant members of our communities and how Countryside could work to study issues, break down barriers and offer direct support in our immigrant communities here in Omaha, in Nebraska and across our country. Please see the information below if you have not signed up for a discernment group. You do not have to be a member of Countryside to join a discernment group.



To see more information about the United Church of Christ and becoming an Immigrant Welcoming Church you can check out resources on their website ucc.org/justice_immigration.

A TIME FOR DISCERNMENT

As we begin to move forward and look for settled ministers, three questions have been formulated by the Church Council to help us begin the discernment process:

1. How do we want to be challenged spiritually and intellectually.
2. What is our call to serve?
3. What does it mean to be the Christian partner of the Tri-Faith Initiative?

To get the conversations started, we will be offering:

Small group meetings which will take place in homes, on Zoom and at the church. They will be made up of 6-12 church members who, together, will meet and talk about their hopes and prayers for Countryside as well as answer the three questions (above).

Learning/listening sessions are another component of our discernment process. These will be opportunities to learn about the United Church of Christ, our leadership model and more about the United Church of Christ search and call process.

Congregational information meetings will be used as another opportunity to get involved and also to provide feedback from the small groups. Here is where you will receive updates and share in the search and call process for settled ministers. Lastly, we will provide feedback opportunities to respond to the output of our small groups and to allow for the most common themes to come to the surface.

To register for a small group go to:
countrysideucc.org/register