



COURTESY OF VICTOR ALOYO, JR.

Beyond Strangers

A brief look at La Iglesia Presbiteriana
Nuevas Fronteras and the challenges of immigration

BY VICTOR ALOYO JR.

Listen closely, and you'll hear two competing stories of immigration being told on television, in political speeches, and in our history books and everyday conversation. One story describes a nation of immigrants, people crossing great distances to build a better life and escape persecution—"huddled masses yearning to breathe free." It is a hopeful story of the courage and sacrifice that made democracy in the United States what it is today. The other story is less inspiring. It's the story of people who were once immigrants trying to shut the gate behind them. It's a story of fear and scarcity—told in every "No Irish Need Apply" sign, in racial slurs such as "wetback," in fenced borders—that reappears anytime the nation starts worrying about jobs. Each story has clung to the other throughout the history of the United States. The one tends to be told by people who are already here as they look back on their forefathers and mothers. The other tends to be a story we tell about *other* people (even, oddly, about the people who were already here when the first European settlers arrived).

Both stories belong to the members of La Iglesia Presbiteriana Nuevas Fronteras, a community of faith located in Plainfield, New Jersey, representing 16 countries and commonwealths of North America, Central and South America, and the Caribbean. These families have traveled through treacherous frontiers seeking economic well-being for their families. Mothers and fathers have come here to find employment and send money home so that their children can eat and go to school. They know all

too well the story of sacrifice. Because so many have been forced to leave behind their families, they have experienced immigration as a traumatic event. Their children often resent them for leaving. They feel abandoned and, in their search for comfort and belonging, disproportionately join gangs, fall prey to those who promise "love," and become victims of alcoholism, drug addiction, and unwanted pregnancies.

This is when the other story rears its head. As a country of immigrants, you'd think we'd do everything we could to support our newest arrivals. So imagine the heartache when a pastor sees families, who have worked hard to remain connected and avert this trauma, separated by legislation.

When I arrived in 2005 to serve Nuevas Fronteras, the United States had received a previously unparalleled influx of migrants, fueling a backlash. From 2005 to 2010, nearly a thousand laws were passed across the country to address the "crisis" of illegal immigration. In 2008, the federal government told all police departments to turn over any unlawful migrants they arrested to federal immigration authorities, a program called Secure Communities. As a result, deportations nearly doubled between 2006 and 2012 to more than 409,000 a year.

Many of the supporters of these actions didn't want to see anyone hurt; they were just concerned about the sustainability of these trends and the well-being of the people already living here. Some just wanted to see the law enforced or reformed, or feared the change taking place

in their communities. But the results were disastrous.

Immigrant families, including some in our own congregation, experienced the trauma of being separated again—this time in reverse. Now parents are being deported to Mexico and Central America, away from their US-born children. Overall, 5,000 children are now in foster care because their mothers or fathers were detained or deported. And though many other immigrants (some of them second- or third-generation US citizens) are here legally, their families are often subject to increased scrutiny and indignities.

That's where Nuevas Fronteras comes in. Having a community of faith and support has never been more important. But Nuevas Fronteras isn't just a community in survival mode; it's thriving. In fact, it is bold enough to declare that it is blessed by God and called to be a blessing to the world. It is going out into its demographically changing community to minister and proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ.

It's so easy to think about immigrants as people that need help, but here at Nuevas Fronteras we believe that immigrants are the ones who have help to offer—to the church and to the nation. Because as long as immigrants are strangers in need, the story and fear that there's not enough to go around will persist. But when immigrants become members of a community that needs their God-given gifts, the story changes.

Even as polls reveal a rise of the "nones" (people who claim no faith at all), and as the church struggles to engage the seemingly uninterested, these immigrant families bring a faith capable of energizing the entire church. Even as we face an uncertain future full of anxiety, this band of sisters and brothers in the faith—who know all too well what it's like to live in fear of the unknown—offer a community of celebration and comfort. Even as studies suggest that the

church is diminishing, here is a gathering that is growing and engaging new frontiers.

Here, dreamers meet, asylum seekers find respite, and the isolated find family. Nuevas Fronteras is attending to the margins, looking to make those whom society would deem "invisible" visible, living out our gratitude for God's grace. We seek to fulfill our mission, for we were once strangers to God and have now been welcomed and claimed by God (Deut. 10:19; 1 Peter 2:10). Whether we are gringos or Chicanos, whether we were born in the United States or Colombia, we are now God's *gente*, God's people. In the kingdom of God there are no undocumented persons, for our passport is the blood of the Lamb.

Since 2005, we have increased our membership and ministry participation from 35 to 145, expanded our children-and-youth ministry, developed a Christian education program for all ages, trained 10 volunteer teachers, developed a governing body of 12 members with five functioning ministry teams, and established a Family Space small-group ministry that offers an intergenerational forum to discuss intercultural challenges. We are a truly multigenerational community, with a number of young adults. We help with a soup kitchen and minister to the homeless. We partner with the Guatemalan Consulate by providing a two-day immigration service to over 1,000 families and have developed a weekly arts-and-theater program for children of the community.

A chartered congregation of the Presbytery of Elizabeth and a recipient of the 2013 Sam and Helen R. Walton Award for furthering Presbyterian mission, Nuevas Fronteras has had 12 of its members go on to earn master of divinity degrees at Presbyterian seminaries and become ministers. Nuevas Fronteras has also been a field-education site for 19 seminarians.

Worship is at the heart of all that we do. Our praise band Agrupacion Nuevas Fronteras includes nine people of different backgrounds and cultures. Throughout Central and South America and the Caribbean, the music tends to be infused with Spanish, African, Asian, and European influences. At Nuevas Fronteras, we combine all the different flavors and praise the Lord with rhythms from various genres, such as salsa, *cumbia*, and merengue.

In these ways and more, we are rediscovering a third story of immigration, a biblical story—a journey of exodus calling us to be "benedicidos por Dios para bendecir al mundo" (blessed by God to bless the world).

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To connect with La Iglesia Presbiteriana Nuevas Fronteras:
» nuevasfronteraspcusa.org
» [facebook.com/nfc525](https://www.facebook.com/nfc525)

In April 2013, the Presbyterian Mission Agency endorsed Nuevas Fronteras as one of several Walton Award recipients. The Walton Awards were established in 1991 as part of a gift from the late Sam and Helen R. Walton through the Presbyterian Foundation. Grants go to outstanding new church developments. To learn more about Mission Program Grants, a ministry of Evangelism and Church Growth: pcusa.org/missionprogramgrants

To get involved with the Office of Immigration Issues of the PC(USA), join advocacy efforts for legislative reform, and locate education, worship, and legal resources: oga.pcusa.org/immigration