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FAMILIES, NATIONS, AND IMMIGRATION: WHO COMES FIRST?

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Valuing Families in the Immigration Debate: An Interview with Jenny Yang

Jenny Yang with Chelsea Maxwell

Jenny Yang is the Vice President of Advocacy and Policy at World Relief where she provides oversight for all advocacy initiatives and policy positions at World Relief. She has worked in the Resettlement section of World Relief as the Senior Case Manager and East Asia Program Officer, where she focused on advocacy for refugees in the East Asia region and managed the entire refugee caseload for World Relief. Prior to World Relief, she worked at one of the largest political fundraising firms in Maryland managing fundraising and campaigning for local politicians. She is co-author of *Welcoming the Stranger: Justice, Compassion and Truth in the Immigration Debate*, serves as Chair of the Refugee Council USA (RCUSA) Africa Work Group, and was named one of the “50 Women to Watch” by *Christianity Today*.

Chelsea Maxwell is the Program Associate for Families Valued, a Center for Public Justice initiative promoting policies that support and honor God's call to both work and family life.

The transcript of this interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

Chelsea Maxwell: How are current immigration and enforcement practices impacting immigrant families in the United States?

Jenny Yang: It's estimated that around 16 million people in the U.S. live in some kind of mixed status family, which means that at least one member of their family is a noncitizen which usually means a green card holder or an undocumented immigrant. As a result of these mixed status families, anytime there is a brush with the law for any reason, there is the possibility a family member could be deported.

Over the past several years under President Obama's administration and now under President Trump, we've seen a record number of deportations impacting not just the individual who is deported but

oftentimes the family of those individuals who are left with the sudden aftermath of a missing loved one. The person who's deported often has to leave their spouses, their children behind unexpectedly. The past couple of years we've seen a record number of deportations, over 400,000.

In our current immigration enforcement system, there are many scenarios in which one or even both parents are deported. Many immigrant parents thus often have to arrange some kind of legal set-up so that their children can be taken care of in that event. Pastors are stepping in to actually help facilitate such arrangements, or to be legal custodians and guardians for the children in case the parents are deported at one point or another. There are a lot of challenges that immigrant families face in determining who is going to take care of their children when they are forced to leave the country.

This experience is really troubling. Just as one example, there's a man named Jose Garcia who was brought to the United States as a ten-year old and lived in Michigan. He couldn't qualify for DACA because he was too old. He had been living in the U.S. for about 30 years. He is married to a U.S. citizen and he has two kids that are 12 and 15 years old. He was recently deported back to Mexico after a lawyer didn't file the right paperwork.

Chelsea Maxwell: You mentioned that pastors in some places are stepping up when children are left without their parents due to deportation. What are some other examples of how local communities, congregations, and faith-based non-profits are responding to these challenges to family?

Jenny Yang: Churches that have immigrants or immigrant led churches, especially Hispanic churches, have this challenge as a daily reality. Ministry in this context means setting up legal guardianship agreements in case one parent or both are deported, so that the kids can be taken care of by someone within the church or maybe sometimes by the pastor themselves.

There are other churches that I know that are providing immigrant legal services to help immigrants in the integration process. There is currently an injunction against Trump's decision to rescind DACA, which means that so far DACA status is still viable and can still be renewed. There are a lot of churches that have been doing immigrant legal services in their own communities as a form of tangible love and outreach to their neighbors. Eastbrook Church in Milwaukee, WI, for example, is a community we've worked with to provide legal services.

In addition to this kind of ministry, we've seen a surge in church volunteers. Just in the past year at World Relief, we've received over 6,000 new applicants of individuals who want to volunteer to work with refugees. It really was an overwhelming response of people desiring to act locally in response to the global refugee crisis. Ironically, we're not getting as many refugees as we anticipated this year, so many volunteers are still waiting to be set up with a refugee family. Just this year in 2018, for example, only 11 Syrian refugees have come into the United States, when a little over 3,000 Syrian refugees came in 2017.

The last thing I would say is many churches have been doing advocacy. When we released an open sign-on letter earlier this year expressing concern about refugees and immigrants, we had church leaders from every state sign on, including many high profile evangelical leaders. We published the letter as a full-page advertisement in *The Washington Post* a few months ago, demonstrating that many church leaders are seeing the brokenness in our immigration and refugee policies and want to see change.

Chelsea Maxwell: When you say that churches are providing legal services, what does that mean exactly? These are churches working within the existing legal and public policy framework to help persons exercise their rights?

Jenny Yang: Exactly. I think it's important to note that when we talk about immigrants, most immigrants are in the United States legally and trying to integrate through the appropriate legal processes. But often these processes are lengthy and complicated. In order to help in this process, World Relief works with a network of churches that are approved by the Department of Justice (DOJ) to serve immigrants with legal services.

This means that there are specific churches that have staff or volunteers that are trained and mentored by World Relief to provide basic immigration legal services that would normally be provided by an attorney.

Once you and your church are certified by the DOJ, you're able to carry out a lot of these similar services. A DOJ recognized site, for example, would offer basic assistance, helping immigrants file paperwork. Some of our DOJ recognized sites have helped DACA recipients renew their application. They also help with green card applications and help provide some basic information about legal options that immigrants have when they're in the United States.

Chelsea Maxwell: One of the things we've been trying to think about at the Center for Public Justice is families as a policy priority in the immigration process. That is, because families are the most basic and fundamental of human institutions, government should uphold the families as fundamental priority, while taking into account other challenges, like security. Does World Relief's advocacy regarding immigration share this concern? If so, how?

Jenny Yang: We would agree that families are the building block through which God is creating society. He honors the family and he wants us as a church, and as a political community, to do the same. This means continuing to support the ability for those who are already in the United States as naturalized citizens or Lawful Permanent Residents to apply for their close family members to immigrate to join them. Right now, however, there are significant wait times for the brothers and sisters of certain nationalities to come, based on annual quotas and restrictions. So, for example, the current wait time for a U.S. citizen petitioning for a brother or sister is over 20 years.

Not only do we currently have significant wait times for families to be reunited, we also have immigration enforcement activities routinely separating family. This is not a question of supporting the rule of law, this is a question of policy and its implementation. Our government should enforce immigration laws but use its discretionary authority to target those with criminal records. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) has limited resources and I believe they're best used on those who are making our communities unsafe rather than those who are law-abiding individuals who may have crossed the border, or overstayed a visa, decades ago.

The DACA program was one avenue through which individuals who came to the United States at a young age, and who are/did go to school or are/did serve in the military, were classified to be low priorities for deportation.

When I see families torn apart, especially when U.S. citizen kids remain and one or both of their parents are deported, I wonder how these kids are going to deal with the trauma and process everything that's happened to them.

We need to look at our legal immigration system and advocate for changes that reunite families quickly. And we should also speak up and ask that our government use its discretionary authority in the enforcement of our immigration laws so law-abiding immigrants who are in these mixed-status families, in particular, are a low priority for deportation.

The thing we know about families in the U.S., any family, is that families create social capital. They create social networks. They create social stability. It is not only fun to celebrate the holidays with our families, but extended family helps when you have a sick kid, or aging parents, or conflicting childcare and work responsibilities. Families often pool resources and open up businesses. There are just so many benefits of families being able to be together. Just think of your own family, about the role your siblings and aunts and uncles play in your life, and immigrant families are no different. I think our government needs to do everything it can, as well as our churches, to recognize the special role that immigrant families play, and do everything they can to keep immigrant families together.

Chelsea Maxwell: You have given several examples of how our nation's current immigration policies and enforcement practices are separating families. How do you think we should be rethinking these policies? What might be more just immigration policies to consider, and what broad principles should be included?

Jenny Yang: World Relief is part of a coalition called the Evangelical Immigration Table and we, through the table, have come up with several principles about what it means for us to consider biblical principles when it comes to immigration. I think the first and primary thing is respecting the God-given dignity of every person. Immigrants are made in the image of God. It's easy to scapegoat them for our problems, but if many of us were born in similar situations, I believe we would have likely

made many of the same choices. We also believe in protecting the unity of the family, respecting the rule of law, supporting national security and national borders, and establishing a pathway for legal status for those who qualify and want to become legal residents.

These are just general principles. In a simpler way, what we want is to make it harder for people to enter illegally, but on the other hand make it much easier for people to enter legally. There also has to be a way to address the individuals and families that are here in the United States without authorization to be able to earn some kind of legal status.

Chelsea Maxwell: We agree that government has a responsibility to ensure economic stability and national security. However, we also recognize that human wellbeing is grounded in the flourishing of the family. How might Christian citizens engage government officials to think about their responsibility to both national wellbeing and the flourishing of families?

Jenny Yang: I think Christians using their voice to contact their elected officials on immigration matters is critically important. There have been a good number of young Christians in particular who have been very active in using their voice. Through the Evangelical Immigration Table and Voices of Christian Dreamers, which is a group of Christians Dreamers who are sharing their stories, we started the [Power to Act Challenge](#). The Power to Act Challenge is based on Proverbs 3:27: “Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due when it is in your power to act.”

Chelsea Maxwell: You have been in this work for over a decade. What gives you hope to keep persevering?

Jenny Yang: God is doing something within the heart of the church and within His people to move them from an American-nationalist perspective to a kingdom perspective. We are increasingly forced to separate our identities, and I think this is an opportunity for us to speak into systems and structures that impact our neighbors.

Every day I see people starting to listen better and speak out against our cultural norm that often ties our faith to nationalism. This takes courage. And it takes devotion, to be driven back to the church and Scripture, and question how we have live out our faith. I think being in a community of people who are in this struggle, of Dreamers themselves who are sharing their stories and not giving up, of fellow advocates who are leaning in and not being discouraged, is inspiring.

These may be polarized times, but it is also a great opportunity for us. We are hopeful because God has the victory in the end. He is the one who triumphs over evil and injustice. And, He uses us as the Church to accomplish those things.

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