



A Statement on the Separation of Families at the Border

For the LORD your God... executes justice for the orphan and widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. —Deuteronomy 10:17-19 (NRSV)

In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.—Matthew 7:12 (NRSV)

See, a king will reign in righteousness, and princes will rule with justice.—Isaiah 32:1 (NRSV)

The Pennsylvania Council of Churches calls on the President, the Department of Justice, and the Department of Homeland Security to end immediately the policy of separating families seeking safety in the United States, as well as the policy to criminally prosecute the parents of these children.

We believe that families are ordained and blessed by God. Families are foundational, providing critical mental, physical and emotional support to the development and wellbeing of children. Tearing families apart is not only cruel and inhumane, but also detrimental to the development of the children and the mental health of the parents. Expert groups such as the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Psychiatric Association and the United Nations human rights office have condemned forced family separation as “harmful, inhumane, and counter to accepted human rights,” saying that “...this policy could cause irreversible harm and psychological damage for the rest of people’s lives...Some consequences could even be passed on to future generations.”ⁱ

We understand that we are a nation of laws, but we also assert that our leaders are not infallible. The author of Deuteronomy speaks of God’s command to protect the “orphan,” the “widow,” and the “stranger,” reminding his audience that they were once “strangers in the land of Egypt” (Deuteronomy 10:17-19). The prophet Isaiah speaks to the fate of leaders who fail to act justly: “Ah, you who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be your spoil, and that you may make the orphans your prey! What will you do on the day of punishment, in the calamity that will come from far away?” (Isaiah 10:1-2). And: “In his 1744 pamphlet on *The Essential Rights and Properties of Protestants*, clergyman-legislator Elisha Williams called Romans 13:1 a ‘text often wrecked and tortured by such wits as were disposed to serve the designs of arbitrary power.’ He insisted that the ‘[civil and religious authorities]’ power is a limited one; and therefore the obedience is a limited obedience.”ⁱⁱ

More importantly, however, people of faith across the religious spectrum are called to what is known as the Golden Rule—to treat others as we would wish to be treated. We are called to love God, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Given a choice, most families arriving at the border would prefer to remain in the homes they know and love. However, most families arriving at our borders are fleeing from violence and threats to their lives; leaving their communities may be the only option for keeping their children safe and protecting them from harm. People everywhere desire a safe place where they can thrive and grow, and loving our neighbor requires that we offer a haven for those whose lives are in danger.

We pray for these families as they grieve the separation they experience. We pray for their safety and their health. We pray also for the border patrols and for those responsible for processing and holding these families. Finally, we pray that hardened hearts of decision-makers in the highest places in government may be softened and that they may have compassion on families whose only “crime” is seeking safety and a haven from fear and violence.

But our prayers are not enough. We cannot remain silent when abuses such as those we are witnessing in the separation of families at our borders are taking place in our name.

We therefore commit the Pennsylvania Council of Churches to work for justice, mercy, and fair treatment of the families arriving in our country. We call on those who interact with migrant families to treat them with love and respect. And finally, we urge people of faith and good will to seek ways to show mercy and love to “the stranger” and to work with us to end this inhumane policy.

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ⁱ <http://www.businessinsider.com/psychological-effects-of-separating-immigrant-kids-and-parents-2018-6>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/anxiousbench/2017/05/mike-pence-romans-13/>