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Student develops resource to help churches grasp immigration issues

By Sarah Farris

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WACO-A growing number of Texas Baptists in recent years have started looking for ways to minister to undocumented immigrants, particularly after both the Baptist General Convention of Texas and the Hispanic Baptist Convention of Texas passed resolutions about immigration in 2003.

In direct response, the BGCT named an immigration task force chaired by Jim Young, director of the convention's Missions Equipping Center, to coordinate ministries and services to immigrants in Texas.

And a Baylor University graduate student, Leigh Jackson, stepped forward to help develop a congregational education project, seeing it as an opportunity to integrate her interest in public policy and passion for service to people in need.



Leigh Jackson, a graduate student at Baylor University's Truett Theological Seminary, created curriculum to help churches teach members about immigration issues. (Photo by Sarah Farris)

As part of her master of divinity and social work program at Truett Theological Seminary and Baylor University, Jackson developed church education materials aimed at teaching church members about immigration issues. She worked closely with the Suzii Paynter, director of public policy and Christian citizenship for the BGCT's Christian Life Commission in Austin.

"The issue of immigration is a sensitive subject," Jackson said. "People have a lot of unanswered questions, especially regarding undocumented immigrants.

Education may be one of the best ways to overcome the hurdles that prevent churches from ministering effectively.

The three-hour program she developed, "Showing Hospitality to the Least of These," was designed to be taught during three Sunday school classes or as a three-hour seminar. "Immigration is a big issue right now," Jackson said, adding many Christians are reluctant to talk about public policy because it is controversial and they wonder what those kind of issues have to do with everyday Christian living.

The curriculum is split into three parts—the tension between love and justice, biblical views of immigration and public policy education.

Jackson described the tension between love and justice as seeing a homeless drug addict on the street and not giving him money because of the fear that he would spend it on drugs. Loving like Jesus, Jackson said, is to love the way he commanded in Matthew 25, which means to give to everyone who asks. Jackson defined justice as “putting parameters on love.”

Jackson contends that to overcome this tension, Christians must see themselves foremost as citizens of God's kingdom.

“Thinking this way causes us to look outside of ourselves,” she said.

The curriculum explores the lives of biblical immigrants, including Abraham, the people of Israel and even Jesus, Mary and Joseph, who fled to Egypt to escape King Herod.

Using these stories and recent accounts of immigrants to the United States, Jackson looks at how Christians should approach immigration.

“There is something holy about hospitality,” she said. “Entertaining a stranger in the Old Testament is linked to the holy.”

Jackson's look at immigration policy ranges from vocabulary to understanding current policies and bills in Congress. This knowledge lets people be better-educated members of their community and better equipped to engage in ongoing immigration dialogue.

“This does not end with resolution but a changed way to look at things,” she said. The curriculum leads people to look at their church and how it practices hospitality.

The most difficult part of the project was finding churches to participate,

she noted. “Many churches I talked to said that they believed the project sounded like a good idea, but they were not in a place where they were ready to engage the topic,” she said.

Two churches participated in the curriculum. Jackson said the reception was good, even though many of the participants were highly educated and already aware of social justice concepts as they apply to immigration.

Jackson now is director of community ministries at First Baptist Church of Waco, where she is jointly employed by the church and by Buckner Baptist Benevolences.

The church is in a transitional neighborhood, and the immigration project is not necessarily an aspect of her job there, but she says the premise of seeing the world as a Christian citizen influences her as she works in her community.

“Our faith goes beyond our small area,” she said. “We don’t want to turn off our faith, ... especially when it comes to the policy arena.”

Jackson has presented her curriculum to several churches across Texas, and she hopes it will continue to benefit Texas Baptists.

Through her seminary and social work training, Jackson said: “I was challenged to think about the big questions surrounding God and our society. However, I was also challenged to apply my thinking to practical ministry. This is where the hard work began.”

For more information about immigration issues, contact Jim Young in Dallas at (888) 311-3900 or jim.young@bgct.org or Suzii Paynter in Austin at (512) 473-2288 or suzii.paynter@bgct.org.

Additional Resources on Immigration:

- [Proposed federal Legislation to Legalize Undocumented Farm Workers:](#)

[The Agricultural Jobs, Opportunity, Benefits, and Security Act of 2003](#)

- [Undocumented Immigrants: Fact and Figures from the Urban Institute Immigration Studies Program, 2004](#)
- [The Border Security and immigration Reform Act of 2003, section by section summary](#)

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