

North American Baptists called to embrace immigrants and refugees

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DALLAS—Baptists have a biblical mandate and God-given opportunity to extend “the gift of abundant friendship” to immigrants and refugees, speakers told the annual meeting of the North American Baptist Fellowship.



Albert Reyes, president and CEO of Buckner International, challenged the North American Baptist Fellowship to practice justice, generosity and redemption in ministering alongside immigrants in the United States. (Photo / Ken Camp)

“At the second decade of the 21st century, we are experiencing an unprecedented era of global migration,” Albert Reyes, president and chief

executive officer of [Buckner International](#), told the NABF meeting, held Jan. 9-11 on Buckner's historic East Dallas campus.

Reyes recalled a visit with a high-ranking official in Guatemala who told described the U.S. economy as "a super-magnet" attracting underprivileged parents from his country who immigrate seeking a better life for their children.

"Global migration is not going away," said Reyes, a vice president of NABF, a regional fellowship of the [Baptist World Alliance](#).

He pointed to Moses' call to justice, generosity and redemption in Deuteronomy 24 as a model for ministry to the fatherless, the widow and the alien who "would not have rights in a court of law."

"Moses wants the children of slaves entering the Promised Land to remember where they came from, to be careful not to repeat what was done to them," Reyes said. "In other words, he wanted the pain of their past to serve as the passion for their future."

Reyes urged Baptists in the United States "to pray for and work for a solution to the 12 million people who are living here without documents."

'They wanted a better future for us'



Elijah Brown (left), general secretary of the Baptist World Alliance, and Rick McClatchy, field coordinator for Cooperative Baptist Fellowship Texas, volunteer at the Buckner Center for Humanitarian Aid. Participants at the North American Baptist Fellowship annual meeting in Dallas participated in a service project to help Buckner International's Shoes for Orphan Souls program. (Photo / Ken Camp)

During the NABF annual meeting, participants heard firsthand from immigrants and refugees, including two Dreamers—young people who grew

up as the children of undocumented immigrants to the United States.

Vilma Soto, a 17-year-old 12th grader from Fort Worth, told the group she and her parents arrived in the United States when she was 3 years old.

“This has been my home,” she said, adding she rarely thought of herself as an immigrant until she began the college application process.

She described the pain of thinking the opportunity to pursue her education in the United State might be denied after all her parents sacrificed to make it possible.

“They wanted a better future for us,” she said. “There is so much they gave up for us. They wanted something better for us.”



Carlos Medina, a 21-year-old Dreamer who came to the United States from Mexico at age 2, described how his parents wanted a better life for him. Medina, a student at Texas A&M University-Commerce, spoke to the North American Baptist Fellowship annual meeting. (Photo / Ken Camp)

Carlos Medina, a 21-year-old student from Kaufman who is attending Texas A&M University-Commerce, said his parents brought him to the United States from Mexico when he was 2 years old.

“They said, ‘We want a better future for you,’” he said.

Because of DACA—the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program—he has been able to attend college while working at a dollar store.

“I want to become a math teacher,” he said. “Without DACA, that’s not possible.”

Medina also noted he would like to travel internationally to share his Christian faith, but without the opportunity to obtain proper documentation, he cannot move freely from one nation to another.

‘System is broken’

Abraham Garcia, pastor of First Baptist Church Amistad in Kaufman, noted 85 percent of the families his congregation has reached are undocumented immigrants.



The U.S. immigration system is “broken,” Abraham Garcia, pastor of First Baptist Church Amistad in

Kaufman told the North American Baptist Fellowship. (Photo / Ken Camp)

“The system is broken,” he said. “There are people who have been waiting in line 15 years just to get an appointment” to pursue U.S. citizenship.

Elijah Brown, general secretary of the Baptist World Alliance and immediate past general secretary of NABF, urged Baptists to advocate for immigration reform and legislation to shield Dreamers from deportation.

“The time is now—right now, this week and next week,” he said. “Support a solution for the children of immigrants who are here. Please use your voice.”

Patty Lane, director of [intercultural ministries](#) with the Baptist General Convention of Texas, interviewed two refugees who relocated to North Texas.

A woman from Afghanistan described how she came to faith in Christ while in Turkey, and a man from Myanmar told how he spent six years in Malaysia before arriving in the United States.

Lane challenged North American Baptists to “come alongside” refugees, extend friendship to them and build relationships.

Listen and learn

Rob Sellers, retired professor theology and missions at Hardin-Simmons University and chair of the [Parliament of the World’s Religions](#), talked about the importance of interfaith dialogue in a pluralistic world.

Sellers emphasized the importance of respecting the devotion practiced by adherents of other religions, being willing to learn from their stories and

offer them the gift of genuine friendship.

“I have found that being humble, open and teachable when relating to them—by being willing to listen instead of so quick to speak—I can more easily build friendships, learn helpful cultural and religious insights, and earn the right to share my own faith,” he said.