

Let's Talk Immigration: Pastor Adam Lipscomb

CHRISTY [00:00:02] Hi, everyone. I am, Christy Staats with the Bibles, badges and business project of the National Immigration Forum, and we are doing interviews about immigration and people are telling their stories. And I am here with Pastor Adam Lipscombe, who I will ask, would you be able to introduce yourself and tell us a little bit about yourself?

ADAM [00:00:23] Sure thing. So my name's Adam. I'm a pastor at City Life Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and I co pastor with my wife, Christy. And so we do this work together. A unique thing about our church is we have an immigrant connection office that is part of part of what we do. And it is a legal, low cost legal aid office that helps immigrants, refugees with applications for citizenship or a change of status. A lot of different services that we provide. But that has been a fun part of our ministry.

CHRISTY [00:01:02] That's fantastic and then actually transitions really well to my next question, which is how did your church or you personally with your wife get involved with thinking about immigration? What was that like for you to start off?

ADAM [00:01:16] Yeah, I think a lot of times when people answer this question, they have a deeply personal story that they're sharing and certainly I have personal stories that have come into play along the way. But one of the things that has shaped my view of immigration as a subject and immigrants as people is really the the Christian scriptures. And so perhaps this doesn't sound as flashy as a harrowing story, but I've been a Bible reader my whole life, and the scriptures have particular things to say about immigrants. And immigration is something that people have engaged in throughout the centuries. All of human history people have moved from place to place for the sake of provision for their families or fleeing violence. And that is certainly captured in the scriptures and also in the Bible, you get a sense for the heart of God for immigrants. So I think I was theologically shaped for, to have a particular orientation toward immigrants from being a Bible reader. And then that led into engagement with the immigrant community here in Grand Rapids. So on the more personal note, I was, we were starting the church 15 years ago. And there were there was a missionary from Bosnia that was living in Grand Rapids at the time. And they were providing citizenship classes for Bosnian immigrants that were in Grand Rapids at the time. So they, it was just sort of working through the civics portion so that Bosnians could take the test. That was a big, people, during that time, Bosnian refugees were eligible for that. And there's just a big wave of that in Grand Rapids. So they said, you need to start doing this in your church. And so we started doing that. We started connecting with different people groups. And then with each-- there's a lot of refugees that are resettled in Grand Rapids. And so we had people from all over the world that were connecting in these classes. And they were just so much fun. I mean, we started doing them as sort of a way to build relationships in the community. But they were just so much fun that we just continued to offer these classes time after time throughout the years. In 2006, there was a large immigrant protest in Grand Rapids. And I saw a group of immigrants amassing and thought, this would be a great time to advertise for a class. So I printed off a bunch of fliers like any shyster church planter might do.

CHRISTY [00:04:36] Fantastic timing to go, "this is an opportunity."

ADAM [00:04:40] Right. Right. So it's completely self-serving, my engagement with this. So I print off a bunch of fliers, ran down to Garfield Park, where the march was going to start, hand out all the fliers that I had. People were asking for more. So I ran back to the, this to our old rickety copy machine at the church, printed off some more fliers and tried to

return. And on my way, the march had already started. And there was a large, large group of people that were coming up Madison Avenue where I was driving down. And so I just, I pulled over and got out of my car and just decided to walk with folks for a while. And I don't -- most of the people that were involved in that march were Spanish speakers from a variety of different countries. And I don't speak Spanish, but I know enough church words in Spanish to pick out some things. And there was a whole church that had T-shirts on from their church. And so I -- I knew that I had the personal connection of, they have a relationship with Jesus, I have a relationship with with Jesus. And I was just struck by -- these are the people that are engaged in this struggle, are people that I have a relationship with through the same God that we serve and love. And so that was just a deeply shaping moment for me. And since then, I have been involved in lots of different protests entering into that struggle, have gotten to know some other organizing organizations here in Grand Rapids and have been there. I tell them to just treat me like a staff person.

CHRISTY [00:06:46] I love that. Little follow up question to that. So I find that there are a lot of blank spaces in people's knowledge about how difficult it is to immigrate to the US or blank spaces around the subject of the undocumented or confusion about refugees. And, you know, as somebody who has mentored and discipled a lot of folks in the church, I've even seen that it's pretty strong in the church space that people have these blank spaces as a pastor. as you're seeing your city where people are having to protest because there are some struggles in the immigrant story. And then you have a church that you're trying to shepherd. You know, what are some of the things that you would want to communicate to your church or the wider Christian community around the country that people might not realize is true about some of these immigrant struggles?

[00:07:46] Yeah, well, I think that one of the blank spaces is that I think people have a high opinion of America. And so they think, well, everybody in the world wants to move here. And so we should be careful with this resource of a country that we have. I think that most of the immigrants and refugees that I've talked to appreciate the country that they are living in, and love it even. But oftentimes their story is borne out of pain and not out of just longing to be part of the American story. And so I think most, not most, but a lot of people don't understand the dramatic struggle of having to lose to move from your country of origin to a different country, learn a new culture and language and how to navigate the ins and outs of that country legally or culturally or otherwise. In terms of employment, even, I think that there's a real lack of empathy that a lot of folks have to that struggle that I would love to see more of just in our society. In the church world, I have a particular bent towards seeing the church grow in this area, because for me, this has not been a political issue. I don't, I'm not part of a particular political party. I don't even, I know that in our country right now, there's a deep divide between conservatives and liberals. I, I am outside of, out of that framework. I don't have a living either way and don't. I don't consider myself part of either camp with that. I'm a Jesus follower, which means that I hope that my views are being shaped by the ethic that Jesus lived and taught. And so for me, one of the tricky things has been people assume that because I am pro immigration, pro immigration reform, that I am part of a whole slate of causes. And for me, I am part of a slate of causes. But they're being shaped by Jesus's teachings. And what I see is the heart of God in scripture. So I think the church will often be misunderstood in the struggle to sort out in society, because I think people think the church is trying to be political. Well maybe, but not in the same senses as being partisan.

CHRISTY [00:11:04] That's a really helpful distinction that the church can advocate for, fixing broken policies which are about people. It doesn't have to be owned by a partisan situation.

ADAM [00:11:16] Yeah, yeah. But I find myself in this very weird middle space because I don't feel like I have a camp that I'm part of outside of the church.

CHRISTY [00:11:25] Totally get that. People are not always comfortable, if you're not firmly in a camp, it's like, which side are you on?

ADAM [00:11:33] Yes, yes, I'm distrusted by everybody. But yeah, for me, it's just deeply part of my faith.

CHRISTY [00:11:42] That's great. I want to dial back. That's just really helpful. And I'm praying as people listen to this, if there's folks outside of the church, you know, if they're looking to Christians, I really hope that they see Christians as shaped by Jesus and not partisan politics. And for those who are inside the church and consider themselves followers of Jesus, I really hope that they'll take your words to heart that Jesus will be shaping how they think about these things, which is it's just really important for us. But a few minutes ago, you were sharing about your church being an immigrant connection church. And I have fallen in love with the immigrant connection that I know. There are people around the country who might not know what this is. Could you give us a few details about that? And also, if churches want to get involved in something like that, how they would.

ADAM [00:12:30] Yeah, this has been a really exciting work, and I never in 100 years would have thought that I would have a legal office as part of the ministry of the church. But there is a program that has been put together to allow for low cost legal aid centers. And churches can participate in this program. It's accredited by the Department of Justice. But our legal representatives don't have to be lawyers in order to engage in giving legal advice and in doing some parts of immigration law. So we are partially accredited, which means we can't go to court, but we can do all but most of the paperwork. And so we're able to give advice and help people fill out paperwork and navigate the system. And we can do it at a lower cost than than a lawyer's office can. So we have people from all over the place, all different nationalities and religious backgrounds and different immigrant stories coming through our building throughout the week to connect with our legal representatives. So it's been a really fun and credible work. Yeah.

CHRISTY [00:13:48] And how did the non immigrant members of the year congregation view this ministry?

ADAM [00:13:54] That is a great question because I'm friends with several other pastors, too, who have immigrant connections offices and who do this sort of legal work out of their churches. And each of these churches are different. So some of the churches have a large immigrant population that's part of the church. Our church doesn't. We haven't. There is not, we don't really view this as a pipeline to connect people to the ministry. We do it sort of out of our heart for just loving our community. So that I think that it shapes our church. Through just the opportunity for volunteering and relationships, and it gives people a practical way of putting together. This is what our faith says about immigrants. How do we then serve these people that God loves? It gives them a practical way of doing that. But our church itself doesn't have many. It's a very diverse church, but doesn't have a ton of immigrants that are part of it.

CHRISTY [00:15:03] I think that almost makes the story, you know, even more beautiful. I mean, not that it's less beautiful if you have loads of immigrants. But, you know, I think people are used to seeing, oh, if it's a monocultural American church, well, then they won't love immigrants. And I think seeing them care for and be kind to and generous to

their neighbors, whether or not they're members of the same church community, is something really reflective of the gospel, actually. Really cool. Well, OK. So I will give you a final question for today. Adam, thank you so much for speaking with us and sharing some of your stories personally as well as your church community. It's just really great to be able to listen. The conversation nationally is quite difficult around immigration. Is there anything that gives you hope right now that we could have better discourse? And what do you think the role of the church is in helping create that better discourse?

ADAM [00:16:00] Yes, those are great questions. It's interesting. So I've engaged in immigration advocacy since that 2006 March, and that has spanned a couple of different presidential administrations. So I've noticed that earlier on, there was, it didn't seem as partisan, the the issue of immigration. And so, in fact, there was real hope that there would be reform early on and that we came really close to seeing some some reforms I think would benefit the immigrant community and to benefit every community in some really positive, positive ways. And it didn't quite get there. And then in the last several years, it's become much more of a divisive issue, which is when, I know you're asking for hope, that's maybe not hope. I think my hope is--.

CHRISTY [00:17:05] We can have reality and things we're hopeful for.

ADAM [00:17:09] Yeah. And I think maybe the hope is that perhaps, again, that it could be a nonpartisan thing, that perhaps we could get to a point where it just makes sense to include people that bring value in a way that gives them legal status and the ability to work and and pay taxes and contribute to our to our community. I know that a lot of immigrants already pay taxes even though they're not able to benefit. But I would give just voice to how decisions are made in our community. I think that that that all makes a lot of sense to me. This is a not even just Christian, but even just as a as a person. I think so. Yeah. So I think I'm hopeful that perhaps we can pull out of this this nosedive of of everything being divisive and come back to just a place of human concern and wanting to give dignity to one another.

CHRISTY [00:18:27] I think that is a great thing for us to pray for and hope for and lean towards in our own circles. And then for the pastors listening in. What do you think the role of the church is in helping create that better discourse? Yes, some of those things that you're helping me lean towards.

ADAM [00:18:47] Yes. So my deep concern for the church outside of the issue of immigrant or immigration, and including the issue of immigration is that the church will just be will be sucked into the same sort of discourse that's happening out in society. So I know that right now there are two powerful political parties whose job it is to divide the nation for the sake of an election. And I think that there is a real danger that the church would be pulled into that unholy work. And so I think that it's really important for pastors and churches to on this issue or lots of different issues to pull back from that and say what is the what is the scripture have to share with us regarding this? What? How? What do we understand the heart of God to be regarding immigrants and then how do we make decisions instead of being pulled into a particular partisan view of that? So that's my advice to the pastors. Help your people be Bible readers and to see things through the lens of scripture.

CHRISTY [00:20:15] That is a fantastic word for us to end on. Thank you so much, Adam. I'm just really grateful for you taking the time to answer some of our questions for everyone listening. This is Pastor Adam Lipscombe, who is over at City Life Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

ADAM [00:20:32] Thank you, Christy.