**Anti-Racism Committee of the Central Florida Presbytery, a Council of the Presbyterian Church (USA)**

**Statement on Florida Immigration Law**

As citizens of the United States who make our home in the state of Florida and leaders in the part of the faith community here that belongs to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), we, members of the presbytery’s Anti-Racism Committee, are deeply troubled by the provisions of legislation that becomes law Jul 1, 2023 regarding immigration.

This law will negatively impact the Florida economy both for citizens of Florida and for immigrants. It also has direct negative impact on religious freedom in Florida.

As people of faith, we base our understanding of the world and the place of individual states and nations in it in the words of the Old and New Testaments which are Scripture for us. There are many passages in the Bible that point to examples of individuals and families leaving their countries, often under the perceived command of God. In Genesis 12, we find that Abraham (Abram) was told to leave his native land for another land God intended to show him. Abraham exercised what Universal Declaration of Human Rights Article 13 adopted by the United Nations in 1948 describes as a “right to freedom of movement” and the “right to leave any country.” Biblical teachings are easily found that go further—to call for compassion, and to create a demand for hospitality as an aspect of neighborly love.

When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God. (Leviticus 19:33-34)

The strongest biblical mandates for caring for refugees and asylum seekers are passages in the Mosaic Law. The crucial point the Hebrew Bible passages convey is that God commands God’s people to receive into their lands those who are displaced, because they were once displaced people who received God’s mercy. This urges us to do unto others as our gracious God did unto us.

When Jesus came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” (Luke 4:16-19)

Jesus’ mission was deeply concerned with the affirmation of the life, liberty, and security of the oppressed. Jesus, and the Hebrew Bible before him, emphasized the rights and needs of the most oppressed, not because they matter more than other people, but because they are the least able to protect themselves from injustice, and their treatment, therefore, serves as a barometer for the broader application and attainment of justice. As followers of Christ, we must, accordingly, concern ourselves with the protection of the rights of all, so that every person may live life in its fullness.

The provisions of this law have devastating impact not only on the rights of persons who come without documentation to seek asylum and economic security in this state but on the economy of the state and the rights of its citizens as well. There is much to be said about this; however, we have particular concern with the following:

Imposition of restrictions on interstate travel

* Refusal to honor drivers’ licenses issued to persons without documentation in other states makes it illegal for those persons to drive in Florida. This provision both makes criminals of people who have passed their own state drivers’ license exams and fails to honor the rights of other states in the matter.
* Amending the crime of human smuggling to provide that a person commits a third degree felony when he or she knowingly and willfully transports into this state an individual whom the person knows or reasonably should know has entered the United States in violation of the law and has not been inspected by the Federal Government since his or her unlawful entry from another country means that congregations which have in their membership people without documentation cannot legally offer to those members the privilege of participating in mission trips or travel to camps and conferences outside the state. Here the citizen members are at risk of committing a felony in which conviction would result in fines and imprisonment. This last provision concerns us not only for the welfare of others but for our own ability and the ability of others in the faith community to practice our faith as communities of believers in which all are welcome. It seems to us to violate our first amendment rights under the United States Constitution.

Deportation of the undocumented and requiring employers of more than 25 persons to use E-Verify to prove that those hired are here legally. This requirement applies both to recent immigrants and those who have overstayed their visas and been unable to renew them but have contributed to the Florida economy for years. The law further impacts business in Florida by imposing stiff penalties including fines of up to $1,000 daily and possible revoking of business licenses for employers who fail to comply. With unemployment at 2.6%, there are not enough citizens of Florida to do the work that needs to be done in key areas of Florida’s economy.

* Florida farmers need 150,000 to 200,000 people each year to harvest crops. While there are some residents here willing to do that work, they are few and the limits on legal immigration mean that without those who come to us willing to work but undocumented our crops may well rot in the fields and the small number that make it into stores be too costly to afford.
* Florida hospitality industry also relies heavily on immigrant labor to do the cleaning and groundskeeping work in our hotels, restaurants and theme parks that are required.
* Florida’s construction industry relies on immigrant labor for housing both new construction and home repairs, retail construction, and the building of safe roads and other infrastructure including public transportation, utilities, and technology.

Requiring hospital personnel in hospitals that receive Medicaid payments to ask those seeking treatment whether they can prove that they are here legally so that the state can have a record of the costs to treat persons here without documentation.

* The request for proof is a voluntary request. No one can be denied service who refuses to answer the question.
* People who are here without documentation may well not know that they can refuse to answer and thus may be hesitant to seek care for themselves and their children resulting in greater health risk for themselves and for others if they do not take advantage of preventative health care including vaccinations.

This law will have a devastating impact on Florida and will be a divisive force among the people of our great state. As faith communities, our role is to promote the values of love, care for our neighbors, and peaceful unity among all. This legislation does the opposite.

We also pray that church members in all denominations in Florida will acquaint themselves with the law and share with employers, hospital personnel and immigrant friends the provisions of the law and the risks it offers both to citizens and persons in this state without documentation.

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