

BRING *the* SKY

The LIRS Detention Visitation Guide



Lutheran Immigration
and Refugee Service



MODULE 1

Why Visit?

A Theology
of Detention
Visitation
Ministry

About LIRS



Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service

migrant children, and support for migrants at risk of deportation and detention and their families. LIRS advocates for welcome, working with government officials to craft laws and policies that preserve human dignity and guiding churches as they support newcomers through the ups and downs of transition into U.S. society.

With an expertise born of decades of service experience, LIRS works with at-risk migrants, offering critical legal and social support to asylum seekers, torture survivors, and other vulnerable individuals. This expertise, experience, and compassion inform the agency's advocacy for just and humane treatment of those who seek protection, freedom, and opportunity in the United States.

Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service has been a champion for vulnerable migrants and refugees since 1939. The organization provides resettlement and community integration services for refugees, specialized care for

About *Bring the Sky*



Abdinisir Mohamed, a Somali journalist, was imprisoned and tortured when he stood up to a terrorist organization. Abdinisir escaped and fled to the United States.

But instead of finding welcome, his freedom was taken again. Abdinisir was detained, shackled, and interrogated for 16 hours before being hauled off to a detention cell.

When a visitor asked him if he missed his family, Abdinisir replied, "I miss my family, but I miss the sky more than anything else. Is American sky blue?"

Abdinisir was freed after seven months and was granted asylum. Many others are held for even longer. All share the same intense longing for a glimpse of freedom. By visiting detained migrants, you can bring that glimpse of freedom—you can bring the sky. A 30- or 60-minute visit can refresh a detainee's spirit, revitalize her courage, rekindle his hope.

Bring the Sky: The LIRS Detention Visitation Guide is a series of inspirational and practical resources to help you touch the lives of detained migrants and be touched by the experience. It was developed as part of an ongoing collaboration with the Presbyterian Church (USA) to provide assistance to those affected by immigration detention.

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Introduction

The Bible has much to say about ministry with the oppressed, standing against injustice, welcoming the stranger, and visiting those in prison. We are called to be like Jesus, who is God with us, by being a compassionate presence to others. And we are called to minister to Jesus as we see God’s image in people who are oppressed.

Although many more Scripture references could be supplied, the ones mentioned in the text are printed in the right-hand column. All quotations are from the New International Version.

Why Visit?

Visiting anyone who is in institutional confinement for any reason is a worthy endeavor on the basis of “doing good” (Galatians 6:9) and administering God’s grace in its various forms (1 Peter 4:10). And the frequently quoted passage in Matthew 25 tells us specifically to visit those in prison (v.36). God hears the groans of people in prison (Psalm 102:20), and St. Paul praises compassion for those in prison (Hebrews 10:34).

What should be the practical outworking of that compassion? The God we call Emmanuel, God with us, says go in person. We see “in person” or “presence” as a key *modus operandi* of God throughout Scripture. A pillar of cloud by day and fire by night led the Israelites to safety (Exodus 13:21). When David was hiding from King Saul’s death threats, his family rushed to be with him (1 Samuel 22:1). Though divine presence was not necessary to save their lives, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, condemned to die for their faith in Babylon, were not alone in the fiery furnace (Daniel 3:25).

God sent his own Son, present with him at creation, to become flesh in fulfillment of the promise of salvation (John 1:1, 14). The angel Gabriel tells Mary, “Be not afraid,” and announces personally that she will bear the Christ child (Luke 1:30). Jesus walked from town to town, personally gathering disciples, teaching crowds, eating with people others despised, laying hands on the sick and disabled (Mark 6:56, 7:32-35) and he sent out

Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. (Galatians 6:9)

Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms. (1 Peter 4:10)

“ I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.” (Matthew 25:36)

“The LORD looked down from his sanctuary on high, from heaven he viewed the earth, to hear the groans of the prisoners and release those condemned to death.” (Psalm 102:19-20)

You suffered along with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions. (Hebrews 10:34)

By day the LORD went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night. (Exodus 13:21)

David left Gath and escaped to the cave of Adullam. When his brothers and his father’s household heard about it, they went down to him there. (1 Samuel 22:1)

[Nebuchadnezzar] said, “Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods.” (Daniel 3:25)

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.... The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:1, 14)

But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God.” (Luke 1:30)

And wherever he went—into villages, towns or countryside—they placed the sick in the marketplaces. They begged him to let them touch even the edge of his cloak, and all who touched it were healed. (Mark 6:56)

There some people brought to him a man who was deaf and could hardly talk, and they begged Jesus to place his hand on him. After he took him aside, away from the crowd, Jesus put his fingers into the man’s ears. Then he spit and touched the man’s tongue. He looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him, “*Ephphatha!*” (which means “Be opened!”). At this, the man’s ears were opened, his tongue was loosened and he began to speak plainly. (Mark 7:32-35)



the Twelve to do likewise (Luke 9:6). In the earliest days of the church, the people of God gathered daily to care for each other’s needs as well as to strengthen each other in the faith (Acts 4:32). God is with us, and we are with one another.

A Heart for the Sojourner

Why should immigrants in detention deserve our special attention? Why should we be particularly concerned about them? We should have a heart for the sojourner because God does.

“When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God” (Leviticus 19:33-34, ESV).

Three things are clear from this passage. First, protection for people who are potentially vulnerable is important to God. Frequently God lists sojourners with the fatherless, the widow, and the poor, drawing attention to them as people living without the safety and provision of traditional Israelite households (Deuteronomy 10:18, Psalm 146:9, Ezekiel 22:29, Malachi 3:5). In that day, just as today, violence and illness took husbands from their wives, parents from their children. War and poverty sent people fleeing to other nations for safety. The Lord called his people to show special concern for those who are separated from their families and homes—to protect them from exploitation, oppression, and the perversion of justice (Deuteronomy 24:17). Their basic needs are to be remembered in the sharing of the harvest and all God provides (Leviticus 19:9-10). Such provision is to be made with dignity. Rather than handouts, God directs the faithful to allow sojourners to glean from orchards and fields, following and sometimes working alongside harvest workers (Ruth 2:8-9).

So they set out and went from village to village, proclaiming the good news and healing people everywhere. (Luke 9:6)

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. (Acts 4:32)

He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing. (Deuteronomy 10:18)

The LORD watches over the foreigner and sustains the fatherless and the widow, but he frustrates the ways of the wicked. (Psalm 146:9)

The people of the land practice extortion and commit robbery; they oppress the poor and needy and mistreat the foreigner, denying them justice. (Ezekiel 22:29)

“So I will come to put you on trial. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud laborers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive the foreigners among you of justice, but do not fear me,” says the LORD Almighty. (Malachi 3:5)

Do not deprive the foreigner or the fatherless of justice, or take the cloak of the widow as a pledge. (Deuteronomy 24:17)

“When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the foreigner. I am the LORD your God.” (Leviticus 19:9-10)

So Boaz said to Ruth, “My daughter, listen to me. Don’t go and glean in another field and don’t go away from here. Stay here with the women who work for me. ⁹ Watch the field where the men are harvesting, and follow along after the women. I have told the men not to lay a hand on you. And whenever you are thirsty, go and get a drink from the water jars the men have filled.” (Ruth 2:8-9)



Second, we are to give equal treatment to sojourners. We are to love others as we love ourselves, a commandment Jesus said is second only to loving God with all of our beings (Mark 12:30-31). Repeatedly, both in terms of privilege and punishment, God requires the same rule for the sojourner and for the native (Leviticus 24:22, Numbers 15:25). The Lord is strongly offended by exploitation of the sojourner, listing extortion of the sojourner alongside sins such as robbery, desecration of holy things, slander, bloodshed, sorcery, adultery, false witness, and mistreatment of workers (Ezekiel 22:7-9, Malachi 3:5). God includes sojourners in benefits such as Sabbath rest (Exodus 20:10), inheritance (Ezekiel 47:21-23), worship rites (Numbers 9:14, 15:14), and protection from vengeance (Numbers 35:14-15). Sojourners play a critical role in the salvation story as God weaves the lives of non-Israelites like Rahab and Ruth into the genealogy of Jesus (Matthew 1:5)

Third, God reminds us that the experience of being the stranger is a part of our history, that we “know the heart of the sojourner” (Exodus 23:9). Four centuries in Egypt—from being saved from famine to being oppressed as slaves—remain in our collective identity along with other stories of sojourn: Abraham leaves Ur for the land of promise. David seeks asylum in Gath. The Israelites are exiled in Babylon. Joseph flees with Mary and Jesus to Egypt. The early Christians scatter outward from Judea to share the good news. God’s people have experienced the best and the worst of living as strangers in a strange land, so we of all people ought to apply the golden rule to migrants. Whether by choice, by captivity, or by the need for refuge, being a stranger is an altogether common part of human existence. It is a situation we should expect to encounter and a need we should be prepared to respond to with kindness and compassion.

The experience of being a stranger is likewise familiar to us as Americans. Immigration is part of

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.” (Mark 12:30-31)

“You are to have the same law for the foreigner and the native-born. I am the LORD your God.” (Leviticus 24:22)

“The priest is to make atonement for the whole Israelite community, and they will be forgiven, for it was not intentional and they have presented to the LORD for their wrong a food offering and a sin offering.” (Numbers 15:25)

In you they have treated father and mother with contempt; in you they have oppressed the foreigner and mistreated the fatherless and the widow. You have despised my holy things and desecrated my Sabbaths. In you are slanderers who are bent on shedding blood; in you are those who eat at the mountain shrines and commit lewd acts. (Ezekiel 22:7-9)

“So I will come to put you on trial. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud laborers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive the foreigners among you of justice, but do not fear me,” says the LORD Almighty. (Malachi 3:5)

“[T]he seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns.” (Exodus 20:10)

“You are to distribute this land among yourselves according to the tribes of Israel. You are to allot it as an inheritance for yourselves and for the foreigners residing among you and who have children. You are to consider them as native-born Israelites; along with you they are to be allotted an inheritance among the tribes of Israel. In whatever tribe a foreigner resides, there you are to give them their inheritance,” declares the Sovereign LORD. (Ezekiel 47:21-23)

“A foreigner residing among you is also to celebrate the LORD’s Passover in accordance with its rules and regulations. You must have the same regulations for both the foreigner and the native-born.” (Numbers 9:14)

“For the generations to come, whenever a foreigner or anyone else living among you presents a food offering as an aroma pleasing to the LORD, they must do exactly as you do.” (Numbers 15:14)

“Give three on this side of the Jordan and three in Canaan as cities of refuge. These six towns will be a place of refuge for Israelites and for foreigners residing among them, so that anyone who has killed another accidentally can flee there.” (Numbers 35:14-15)

Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab,
Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth,
Obed the father of Jesse... (Matthew 1:5)

“Do not oppress a foreigner; you yourselves know how it feels to be foreigners, because you were foreigners in Egypt.” (Exodus 23:9)



our family stories from the Mayflower to Ellis Island to airport arrivals and border crossings. Each generation has had immigration challenges to contend with in ways large and small: *Who do we invite in? How can we foster integration?* Each generation has questions to ask: *Who are the most vulnerable? Who is in danger? For whom do we need to intervene with protection?*

A Broken System

How has our nation responded to these questions? It's true that we welcome many people every day. We grant tourist, student, and employment visas. Visitors from other countries are both subject to our laws and benefited by our human rights protections. Each year the president determines the number of how many refugees we will resettle, typically in the tens of thousands. Congress budgets the resources to make good on that determination. Foreigners who are victims of crimes in the United States are afforded protections, services, and visas to remain in the country. We invite newcomers to become citizens just as generations of our ancestors have done.

But our response has not been without its problems. Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service keeps a focus on the brokenness of our system and its detrimental impact on the individuals and families it places at risk. We are grateful for laws that truly protect our nation, and we understand that there must be consequences when those laws are broken, but we call for greater justice in our laws and in how they are enforced.

Protection, fairness, dignity, and proportionality should be our guiding principles. Seeking safety from persecution should not be punished. Infractions of civil laws should not be treated as crimes. The oft-quoted "eye for an eye" passage ("Anyone who injures their neighbor is to be injured in the same manner: 20 fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth. The one who has inflicted the injury must suffer the same injury." Leviticus 24:19-20) is less about retribution and more about proportionality. The point is not to require reciprocity but to prevent vengeful overreaction such as "death for an eye." Consequences should be appropriate for the offence.

Unfortunately, protection, fairness, dignity, and proportionality are not hallmarks of our immigration laws, and nowhere is that more evident than in the detention system. When a survivor of torture flees from his homeland and asks for asylum when he lands at a U.S. airport, we put him in detention where he is retraumatized. Is that protection? Our government requires mandatory detention of all undocumented immigrants, whether or not they are a flight risk or a national security threat. Is that fairness? Although not having documentation is an administrative violation, undocumented migrants may be detained indefinitely and are often held in the same facilities as people with criminal convictions. Is that dignity? A mother who overstays her visa must leave her U.S. citizen children for 10 years before she can return to the country legally. Is that proportionality?

Compassion in Action

For the sojourner in detention, feeling forgotten and invisible, the most important way we can demonstrate compassion is through visiting. It's not a complicated call. It involves simply showing up. You probably won't be able to fix this person's situation, but you can simply be a friendly presence. Listen. Bring a little bit of the sky inside the concrete walls. Break up the monotony and indignity of incarceration. Give hope and



focus on what comes after detention by teaching about U.S. culture and practicing English. Give comfort to those facing deportation.

Like the angelic visitor you can say, “Be not afraid.” Like David’s family joining to him in hiding, say, “I am with you!”

Compassion means “to feel with.” As you come alongside detainees, you will experience their trials and triumphs. You may be blessed as you encounter unique stories of courage and endurance, and you may grieve as new friends are deported or transferred to facilities far away. You may be privileged to see freedom granted and families reunited, and anguished when you see freedom denied and the loneliness of separation. You may rejoice to see hope restored after trauma, and angered as you witness physical suffering in poor conditions. Whomever you meet and whatever circumstances you witness, you will be a blessing to the lives you touch, and you will be enriched by the experience of reaching out to people with clear and poignant needs.

Your experiences may also move you to further action. Many visitation volunteers decide to speak out, advocating for individuals and for better laws. You may be moved to become part of broader ministry efforts to walk with sojourners. Above all, you will be meeting people God loves and you be forever changed.

From Personal Call to Ministry Leadership

After the *why* come the questions of *how* and *who* will make this calling a reality with you. Depending on where you live, it may be as easy as joining an existing effort. Faith-based and community groups doing visitation can be found near many detention facilities. Or you may decide that starting an effort in your congregation or area is the way to go. If that is the case, the following modules in this guide will acquaint you with the practical matters of conducting visits and structuring a sustainable ministry. You will also find ideas and connections for going beyond visitation such as advocacy and community support for people released from detention.

In any scenario, you may wish to engage others in study, prayer, and action: Consider forming a group to watch and discuss films such as *The Visitor* (2008). Use Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service’s Bible study resources, including “Be Not Afraid” and “Out of the Waters,” to spark discussions of faithful responses to the heartbreak immigration issues can cause. Connect with LIRS on social media (lirsblog.org, www.facebook.com/LIRSorg, twitter.com/LIRSorg) and share posts on detention issues with likeminded people. Not everyone with a heart for those in immigration detention is ready to visit, but anyone can become a prayer partner, lifting up concerns of those who visit and those who are visited alike. Also make it a point to connect with any organizations in the area that are positioned to help people in detention such as legal service providers, advocacy groups, and social service ministries. The most effective visitation ministries cultivate or plug into networks for peer support, for practical assistance such as housing and health services for individuals released from detention, and for staying current with trends and resources.

However you choose to be involved, we welcome your partnership in our mission of welcome!