

# Liberal Protestant View of the Refugee Issue

Book/Study Guide review by Roy Beck

Protestant churches have a long and deep-seated tradition of leaving the bulk of organized Bible study and the support of “missions” to the distaff side of the congregation. Each year the liberal Protestant bureaucracy puts out three studies to be used by women’s groups across the country.

These are the official studies for mainline Protestantism for the year. To facilitate leadership for the program there are regional training sessions that occur in the late spring and summer. In the late summer “schools” are organized at the state level. Finally, in late fall, winter and spring, people who have trained in earlier schools bring the studies into local congregations.

This cooperative program has been going on for decades among women’s groups in Presbyterian, United Church of Christ, Episcopal, Lutheran and Disciples — but especially United Methodist — churches. Such a sustained effort at education each year about a particular country, a spiritual topic or book of the Bible, and a selected social issue has had a tremendous influence on the thinking of mainline Protestants.

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**Roy Beck** is Washington Editor of *The Social Contract* and an active youth worker in the Mount Olivet United Methodist Church in Arlington, Virginia. Between 1980 and 1987 he was the most honored journalist in the United Methodist Church for his work as Associate Editor of the *United Methodist Reporter*, a large-circulation national journal. He is the author of *The Case Against Immigration: The Moral, Economic, Social and Environmental Reasons to Cut Back Immigration to Traditional Levels* (W. W. Norton & Co., 1996) His website address is [www.NumbersUSA.com](http://www.NumbersUSA.com).

Some books written for these studies are better than others. It is not uncommon for the writer to come from deep within the national religious bureaucracy and heavily reflect the biases of that bureaucracy.

The social issue topic for the 1998-1999 program-year is refugees, for which Elizabeth Ferris was commissioned to prepare a study book. The result is *Uprooted! Refugees and Forced Migrants*. Dr. Ferris is a Quaker who serves as director of the immigration and refugee program of the National Council of Churches. She earlier was an officer in the refugee department of the World Council of Churches.

As a portrait of the awesome challenges posed by mass refugee movements around the globe, this book does the job. But people encountering this topic in their own congregations should be very careful. The book is not what it first seems. It achieves a level of legitimacy with a

lot of accurate material about world-wide refugee flows and with surprisingly candid notes about weaknesses of the current U.S. refugee resettlement system and some of the ethical questions raised by those weaknesses.

Yet when the book — and the Leader’s Guide — get around to what church members should do, the results suggest either intellectual sloppiness or outright intellectual dishonesty.

## Intellectual Bait and Switch

The first page of the book sets up a classic intellectual bait and switch:

*This is a book about people who are forced to leave their homes, their communities, their countries. It is not about people who take a job in another land because travel is broadening or people who migrate because they want a better life for their children.*

That is an excellent description of what this book

**Uprooted!  
Refugees  
and Forced  
Migrants**

by Elizabeth G. Ferris  
New York: Friendship Press  
120 pages, \$9.45



should have been. But when the author writes about what church members should do, she goes far beyond political action for refugees and includes all immigrants, the vast majority of whom come to the United States for a better economic life — the very people she said were *not* the subject.

The point of the book isn't about international refugees after all. It is about the agenda of denominational Washington lobbying offices to fight all efforts to reduce immigration, and even to fight most efforts to combat illegal immigration.

The study dresses up in the heart-tugging stories of refugees fleeing for their lives. But its primary purpose appears to be to rally American Christians to protect the current high flows of non-refugees coming for economic purposes.

### Intimidation Against Open Discussion

It might be difficult for church members to feel comfortable raising questions about the book's conclusions because of the way all critics seem to be lumped in with the "backlash against immigrants and political scapegoating of foreigners" first mentioned on page 2 and repeated throughout the book.

This is intimidation against the very discussion of the ethics of complex public policy issues one would hope such a study was designed to foster.

Readers are repeatedly warned of "immigrant bashers" who would seek to change current refugee and immigration policies. And readers are put on guard against people in their own congregations who might question the conclusions of the book:

*The fact remains that the current pervasive anti-immigrant backlash also exists in our churches. There is much hard work to be done in our congregations in the areas of education and the raising of awareness about refugee and immigration issues.*

Certainly it is possible that some members of our churches are motivated by bigotry and ignorance. But when the book fails to make it clear that there also are honest critics of the historically high immigration volume of today, it smears all disagreeing Christians as bigoted and ignorant.

The book gives no historical context by which to understand that Americans may be currently questioning immigration because the numbers have gone so much

higher than traditionally was the case. The annual average of U.S. immigration before 1965 was around 230,000. Today it is running around 1 million (not counting illegal aliens). The author takes no note of this. Rather, any concern about immigration is assumed to be racially motivated.

### Candor About Refugee Policy

The absolute defense of U.S. refugee resettlement policy in the end of the book does not match the weight of evidence earlier in the book that reveals a U.S. refugee resettlement program that fails the people most in need of assistance.

Traditional international norms have called for a country to bring in only the limited number of refugees who face danger from rivals in the refugee camps or who, for political reasons, have almost no chance of ever being allowed to return home. Ferris points out that U.S. policy violates these norms by filling refugee slots primarily with people who "are not refugees in a normal sense." Although they may face economic hard times and perhaps social discrimination, they do not face death or persecution in their home countries. The process often becomes outlandish as people get on refugee waiting lists and, after being notified they can come to America as a refugee, choose to stay in their home country for a few more years until a more convenient time to move.

The author also notes that the U.S. system favors previous refugees' relatives over refugees in real danger.

*What, for example, is more important — to bring in the mother of adult refugees who miss her, or a person who is living somewhere under a death threat? While you can make a good argument for the protection case, in practice it is really tough to tell the refugee in your office or congregation that his or her mother is not a priority and that other refugees are in greater need of resettlement.*

That points precisely to the problem of basing broad public policy on emotional individual contacts instead of careful analysis of overall need. The book recommends that churches expose more Americans to resettled refugees so that as they learn to like those individuals they will drop their opposition to the current program.

But what about the millions of refugees in camps around the world with whom Americans cannot have a personal contact? Nearly all of those people will never

have a chance to be resettled in a rich country like the United States. As the author states, “No country wants refugees.” The reasons are many. Their presence in large numbers in both rich and poor countries often unsettles labor markets, depresses wages, drains social services, creates social tensions, damages environmental resources and shifts political balances. In some cases, refugees throw whole regions into political instability and contribute to new wars.

Thus it is highly unlikely that wealthy nations will

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ever take — as a combined total — much more than 1 percent of the world’s uprooted. Although American local churches tend to spend most of their resources and time on such resettlement, the only hope for perhaps 99 percent of refugees is in compassionate care while in camps in neighboring countries and in going home.

The more cynical reader may wonder if some of the motivation for this strange imbalance lies in a desire to preserve large church bureaucracies that were set up after the Vietnam War to handle what was supposed to be a short-term program for refugee resettlement.

### **Antagonism Toward Reform**

*Uprooted! Refugees and Forced Migrants* consistently castigates recent efforts to reform the U.S. refugee program. It never lets the reader in on the identity of the apparently hard-hearted reformers. The main reform that church lobbyists killed in 1996 was proposed by a blue-ribbon federal commission appointed by leaders of both parties in Congress and by President Clinton. The chair was the late Barbara Jordan, a respected lawmaker from Texas.

I was one of 20-some witnesses who sat around a large table with the commission to discuss refugee policy during its deliberations. I heard the representative of the State Department explain that more than half the people coming into the United States as refugees are not refugees under any international standard. I heard the

representative of the United Nations say that even most of the “real” refugees the United States resettles are not the ones with “special needs” for whom resettlement is designed. UN refugee officials feel that the U.S. refugee program often causes more harm than good by resettling refugees who don’t have special needs and thereby enticing many other refugees to refuse to resettle in their home country and enticing still other people to risk their lives by needlessly leaving their country in the belief that by so doing they may get a chance at “coming to America.” I heard a major refugee proponent tell the commission that the refugee program was corrupted and was in danger of losing public support if not fixed.

Jordan and her commission responded to all those problems — problems noted in the early part of this book — by proposing reform legislation.

But the reform was killed in Congress. How it was killed is described (accurately, I believe) in this book. The author describes a Refugee Protection Campaign established by the mainline Protestant lobbies. Although she never identifies the reforms with Barbara Jordan, it was this Campaign that mobilized a massive network of local churches and their activists to defeat Jordan’s reforms. The author admiringly tells how the Campaign persuaded thousands of churches which had sponsored refugees in the past to introduce refugees to their Members of Congress and appeal for killing the reforms.

The churches’ Campaign was successful. It protected a refugee program that continues to be filled with non-refugees. It also helped persuade Congress to vote against what the book calls “Draconian cuts in legal immigration.” In fact, though, Barbara Jordan pushed for cuts down to a level that would have been more than double the traditional U.S. average. The cuts would have come primarily by ending family chain-migration which Jordan identified as undercutting the economic opportunity for those most vulnerable of American workers.

How much more stimulating this book would have been if it had laid out the opposing positions of the church lobbies and of Barbara Jordan’s commission and allowed the reader to compare the ethical implications of each. Instead, everybody who agreed with Jordan seems to be put into the category of scapegoaters, racists and immigrant bashers.

### **A Few More Specifics**

On page 8, Ms. Ferris castigates the U.S.

government for stopping the flow of illegal aliens from a repressive government in Haiti. But she doesn't mention that the full force of the American military was used after that to topple that government and establish democracy there. Re-settling refugees could have helped only the small percentage that escaped. Helping establish democracy benefitted everybody on that unfortunate island.

Chapter 3 offers a richly textured case study of the refugee situation in Rwanda. It is well worth reading and discussing.

On page 70, the author states that "it is much harder to blame or scapegoat immigrants once you get to know them." This points again to a fatal flaw throughout the book. The author always assumes that criticism of an immigration policy is based on hostility toward individual immigrants. But if the volume of immigrants is causing economic disparity, environmental damage and social disruptions, it really doesn't matter if you think the individuals are nice people; the problems still remain. Public policy decisions have to be made on broad analysis and not on popularity contests.

"The principle that immigrant citizens or residents should be able to reunite with family members still living abroad has been a bedrock [of U.S. immigration policies]," the book states on page 73. Actually, that principle has been in effect only since the 1950s. Traditionally, immigrants have been accepted as individuals or as nuclear families. It is the addition of extended family members to the immigration policy that has created the chain migration that has helped quadruple immigration numbers.

On page 74, the author attempts another of her efforts to attribute as many racist qualities to the American people as possible. She refers to American anger against illegal aliens from Mexico and Central America while there is "little public outcry in the United States about the estimated 50 percent of illegal immigrants from countries such as Ireland, Italy and Canada, who overstay their visas." In fact, all of the major reform groups working to stop illegal immigration place high priority on workplace verification systems designed especially to discourage the visa overstayers and on aggressive deportation of the overstayers. What the author doesn't mention is that the church lobbies that she favors have fought tools like the ones proposed by the Jordan Commission to identify visa overstayers.

Session 4 of the Leader's Guide is filled with inaccurate and misleading tests, skits and other material. A supposed test on "fact and Fancy" is mainly fancy. For example, it claims that immigrants pay more in taxes than they cost governments. However, the National Academy of Sciences just last year concluded that the average immigrant — because of significantly lower earnings than the average American native and, thus, much lower taxes — requires hundreds of dollars a year more in government services than paid in.

The danger of such a strong dismissal as mine of this book is that it might suggest disagreement with two

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very important points. The book is right to call on Christians to examine our hearts and actions and be certain that we are not inadvertently blocking refugees already in the United States from attending our churches. And the book properly calls us to look beyond the comfort of our own lives to consider the tragedies of millions of uprooted people around the world.

But the book fails to focus our attentions on those millions overseas. Nor does it paint an honest portrait of the plight of resettled refugees in our own country who — according to multiple studies — are held back in their economic and social assimilation into America by the arrival each year of another million foreign workers and their families through the non-refugee immigration program that this book and the church lobbyists so vigorously defend. -//-