

# Justice Peace Links

Justice and Peace Committee – Churchwide Coordinating Team – Presbyterian Women

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courtesy of Journal.us News Service

## The DREAM Act

### Introduction<sup>1</sup>

First introduced in 2001, the DREAM (Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors) Act was most recently introduced in Congress by Senator Richard Durbin (D-IL) in the summer of 2011. The DREAM Act is legislation that would provide a way for undocumented youth to legalize their status. The legislation is very narrow. It sets forth the criteria for qualifying for the program and the responsibilities of those who choose to benefit from it.

Currently, children who are brought to the United States by their parents have no way to regularize their status in the United States. This means that youth who may have no memory of their birth countries, who attend school in the United States, and who can only imagine their futures as existing within the United States, are told that they are not welcome in the only country they have ever called home.

When undocumented youth turn 18, they are at risk of deportation if they come to the attention of immigration officials. In addition, they are unable to secure a driver's license, work or become full members of American society, with rights and responsibilities. In some states, undocumented students are not allowed to attend public universities. In others, undocumented students are forced to pay out-of-state tuition. These barriers can make for a bleak future.

However, there is hope.

The DREAM Act will provide a pathway to legalization for a specific subset of undocumented youth. They must have been brought to the United States by their parents before the age of 16. They must

### First-hand Accounts

#### *Anonymous Christian Student*

My parents decided to move to the United States in 2007 after my father had been working in another city, separated from our family (except on weekends) for about 12 years. My mom was sure that moving to the United States would give us a better opportunity to grow as a family.

Although adjustment to a new country and language were difficult, I believe the move was a miracle for me and my family. This country has given me much more than just a better lifestyle—it has given me an opportunity for a splendid education, a chance to grow in my faith and learn to serve others, and a wonderful, united church family.

School was difficult for me initially; however, once I learned the language and joined organizational activities at school, such as choir, debate and theater, things were smoother. While my school offered many academic and social programs, my undocumented status prevented me from participating fully in many of them. In debate, there was a national tournament in Los Angeles that I was not able to be a part of because I did not have an identification card. A trip to Disney World was nearly cancelled when I was told the state police might stop our vehicle, to check for the legal status of students. I was unable to attend a theater festival because it was necessary for students to be legal residents.

demonstrate good moral character and accept responsibility for their immigration status going forward by continuing to have good moral character and serving in the military or attending/graduating from college. If the youth fail to live up to their responsibilities under the DREAM Act, it is understood that they will be deported. For a summary of the legislation, download the pdf at <http://www.immigrationforum.org/images/uploads/2011/ForumDREAMOnePager.pdf>.

## What Does Our Church Say?

In 2008, the 218th General Assembly passed an important resolution, the “Resolution on Local Enforcement of National Immigration Laws that Adversely Affect Local Congregations.” In part, this resolution “calls upon churches, presbyteries, and synods to closely work with youth who are living with a sense of hopelessness due to lack of a legal status.”<sup>2</sup>

In 2006, the 217th General Assembly passed another important resolution on advocacy and welcome for all immigrants. In part, the General Assembly “challenge[d] each Presbyterian congregation and presbytery to embrace a comprehensive approach to ‘advocacy and welcome’ for immigrants that includes, at the very minimum:

- a. an opportunity for hard-working immigrants who are already contributing to this country to come out of the shadows, regularize their status upon satisfaction of reasonable criteria, and, over time, pursue an option to become lawful permanent residents and eventually United States citizens.”<sup>3</sup>

Read more at <http://oga.pcusa.org/publications/218th-general-assembly-actions.pdf>, <http://oga.pcusa.org/immigration/pdf/immigration-resolution-2008.pdf> and <http://oga.pcusa.org/immigration/pdf/immigration-resolution-2006.pdf>.

## What Does the Bible Say?

The following scripture study comes from the PC(USA)’s *DREAM Act Toolkit*, available for free download at [http://oga-new.pcusa.org/media/uploads/oga/pdf/\\_immigration/dreamactpacket.pdf](http://oga-new.pcusa.org/media/uploads/oga/pdf/_immigration/dreamactpacket.pdf). The *toolkit* contains a number of scripture text studies for further exploration.

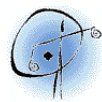
Then Joseph died, and all his brothers, and that whole generation. But the Israelites were fruitful and prolific; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them. Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. He said to his people, “Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.” Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. But

Last spring, I graduated from high school and was accepted to Texas A&M University. However, I was unable to secure a scholarship and my family did not have the funds for this purpose. I am attending a community college, but I hope to switch to a four-year college or university in the future.

Prior to high school graduation, I wasn’t sure what I was going to do with my life, or which path I was going to take. One night, after much thought, I found an old memo from a Christian organization in my former country of Mexico. It read, “Your smile can change things and people. Show others that with Christ, everything is easier and better. Take [Christ] wherever you go; don’t leave [Christ] here.” I felt such great joy after I saw those words, and I realized how much I loved to serve others. I started to think of those times when I helped distribute food to families in need and Christmas gifts to children, through the food pantry and so many other volunteer activities. I have always wanted to make a difference in the world, and I’ve discovered that sharing God’s word is the answer. I started talking to my pastor about what I need to do to prepare for ministry and to become a pastor as he is. God touched my heart; now I want to follow Jesus’ example by touching the hearts of others.

Fortunately, many people around me are willing to support me. I attend a church with a great pastor who has become an example in my life. The only thing that worries me is my immigration status and how it could affect my dreams and goals. I try not to think about it; I try to remember that my faith can move mountains. I know God has a plan for me and that there is no problem in this world I cannot solve with God’s help.

—Anonymous undocumented  
Christian student



the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them.

—*Exodus 1:6–14* (NRSV)<sup>4</sup>

## Discussion

What was it about the Israelites that frightened Pharaoh? What do you think of the mention that the work the Israelites were doing was “for Pharaoh”? Is the foundation of this story at work in our reality? Is the current immigration debate, in part, racialized? How many times is the fertility of the Israelites mentioned? Are fertility rates of immigrants prevalent in newspaper outlets today? How might the debate be framed if people did not feel as if they were being outnumbered or outpowered?

## Get Involved

Pray for all people who live in fear because they lack documents, for those who unfairly judge people of color, and for all who have the power to change the lives of immigrants through official citizenship.

Help bright committed students achieve the American DREAM.

Contact your congressional representatives and urge them to co-sponsor and support the DREAM Act. Visit [www.house.gov](http://www.house.gov) to find contact information for your district’s congressional representative. Visit [www.senate.gov](http://www.senate.gov) to find contact information for your senators.

Educate your congregation and community about the harsh realities facing undocumented youth by downloading the PC (USA)’s DREAM Act Toolkit ([http://oga-new.pcusa.org/media/uploads/oga/pdf/\\_immigration/dreamactpacket.pdf](http://oga-new.pcusa.org/media/uploads/oga/pdf/_immigration/dreamactpacket.pdf)) and consider additional ways you can support young undocumented persons in our communities.

## Notes

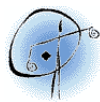
1. Introduction by Melissa Gee, advocacy and legal services coordinator in the PC(USA) Office of Immigration Issues.
2. *Minutes of the 218th General Assembly*, PC(USA), Part I, *Journal*, 2008, Item 09-21, p. 1064; accessible at <http://oga.pcusa.org/publications.htm#min>.
3. *Minutes of the 217th General Assembly*, PC(USA), Part I, *Journal*, 2006, Item 09-15, p. 887; accessible at <http://oga.pcusa.org/publications.htm#min>.
4. Scripture quotations marked NRSV are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, are copyrighted © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., and are used by permission.

*Samantha*

The DREAM Act . . . what does this “dream” mean? To some, it might mean the opportunity for people to “take” our money, or the opportunity for criminals to be free. To others, it might not mean anything—it is viewed as just another law that might be passed. To me, a young Presbyterian woman who migrated from Mexico to the United States at the age of four, it means belonging. I won’t give statistics or government-issued statements about the importance of the DREAM Act (for those, all that’s needed is to “Google” it). I will give a personal account of how the DREAM Act might affect a person’s life.

I attend California State University of Dominguez Hills. The mother of a high school graduate from my church recently came to me seeking college advice for her daughter. This mother worried that her daughter lacked motivation to attend college, so I decided to speak to the daughter and encourage her. When I spoke with this young woman, I saw frustration and sadness within her. This young woman is undocumented, and she did not see the point of going to college. Why should she attend if she can’t get financial aid or a job to pay for the college’s high tuition? Further, what good would a degree do if she is not able to get a job due to her undocumented status? These were questions that I couldn’t answer, but when I heard her express feelings of being lost and of not belonging, I could relate to those feelings all too well.

The decision for my family to migrate to the United States when I was four was not up to me. As far as I was concerned, I was going to see angels, since my father decided to migrate to Los Angeles (The Angels). Because we arrived without documentation, we couldn’t return to visit Mexico. After a while, I didn’t remember



much about the country where I was born. The United States became my new home. Yet, everyone took the time to remind me that I was not from the United States. I remember thinking, “Well, if I can’t relate to people from Mexico, and people believe that I shouldn’t be in the United States, then where do I belong? Should I be in the place that saw me born or should I be in the place that gave me the skills to live?” These questions and related feelings did not go away once I received my U.S. citizenship, but getting my citizenship did help minimize them.

The DREAM Act is not a political statement—it is a toolset for young women, like me, to use in our search for a sense of belonging and our purpose in life.

— Samantha Reyes, co-moderator  
Racial Ethnic Young Women Together  
Coordinating Team  
Presbytery of San Gabriel

## *Genie*

I have been a Presbyterian as long as I can remember. I am a graduate of Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary and have worked 60 years in various positions in church and community. I have always been involved in issues of social justice and human rights.

After September 11, 2001, I joined with a few teachers, counselors and lawyers who came together to help undocumented students. These students were distressed about their futures because they were unable to work and, in some cases, attend college. We focused our efforts on

- alerting teachers to let us know if any of their students were picked up by police or immigration;
- meeting with students and providing information to help them know their rights;

- educating ourselves about the political process, which we needed to understand in order to rescue students who were in jail or under deportation orders;
- becoming advocates for individual students who had been identified and placed in jail or a deportation center (this advocacy was done through jail visits, being present in court, finding lawyers, counseling with families, etc.);
- educating the people in our churches about the issues and the need for Congress to pass the DREAM Act, which would give students legal status, enabling them to work and go to school without fear of being deported;
- helping people in the church and community to understand how the DREAM Act will benefit our country—many of these students focus their studies in the demand fields of science and engineering, where we have a shortage of professionals; and
- supporting undocumented students who wanted to organize events to promote the DREAM Act.

It is important for the women of the church to study and support the DREAM Act. The tasks above are still effective ways for Presbyterian women to get involved in helping undocumented youth achieve their dreams. It is a real joy to work within the political process that enables an undocumented student to be released from jail or from immigration detention. It is rewarding to make a visit to the chief of police and help him understand the circumstance of undocumented students.

We need a lot of people who will pressure their national senators and representatives to pass the DREAM Act. Everyone can do so. Please join this important work.

— Genie Zavaleta  
New Covenant Presbytery

