

RECEIVING FAITH IN AN AGE OF GLOBAL MIGRATION AND ITS RESPONSE

Research Summary and a Framework for Evangelical Reception, Integration, and Public Engagement
Alan Cross, DGL • Global Strategy Forum, CATALYZE: *Discern the Time. Shape the Future* • Fort Worth, TX, September 2026

Purpose. This paper synthesizes two complementary research projects based in the United States: the 2026 *Receiving Faith* doctoral dissertation and, “Evangelical Perspectives on Immigrants, Immigration, and Engagement: Implications for Congregations Comprehensive Research Report,” a 2022-2024 World Relief multi-region study of evangelical perspectives on immigrants, immigration, and engagement. The combined result of these adjacent research projects *asks how evangelical Christians are shaped to receive immigrants, what inhibits reception, how host people and newcomers can build common life together, and how a Justice-Mercy-Humility framework can help guide public engagement amidst competing values and challenges.*

1. Research Foundations

Receiving Faith (2022-2026)

Receiving Faith: An Exploration Into Factors That Shape American Evangelical Response to and Reception of Immigrants in the Local Church (2026), a doctoral dissertation written by Alan Cross, was a qualitative, critical-realist, phenomenological study using purposeful positive deviance to examine evangelicals who developed sustained practices of receiving immigrants despite cultural, political, linguistic, ethnic, and social barriers. Field research among evangelicals who were primarily Southern Baptist centered on ten native-born receiving participants in Montgomery, Alabama, ten in Petaluma, California, three immigrant-ministry leaders in Alabama/Georgia/Ohio, and nine immigrant participants who described being received. The study’s findings were then field tested and confirmed in three pilot project workshops amongst over fifty evangelicals, primarily Southern Baptist, from diverse backgrounds in Petaluma, CA, Mobile, AL, and New Orleans, LA. In Critical Realist/Phenomenological fashion, the study sought the underlying causal factors beneath stated and observed attitudes: how worship, relationships, identity, barriers, and practices interact over time to create people who receive others as an ongoing lifestyle (Cross 2026).

World Relief National Research (2022-2024)

Evangelical Perspectives on Immigrants, Immigration, and Engagement: Implications for Congregations (2024), was a multi-year World Relief project led by Ruth Melkonian-Hoover and a team of researchers. In 2023-2024 the team conducted 15 focus groups with more than 150 participants in Chicago, Memphis, Sacramento, Spokane, and Upstate South Carolina; an online survey received 243 responses, with 223 used in the principal analytic sample; and 23 pastors/church leaders and World Relief mobilizers were interviewed. More than 95% of survey respondents attended church weekly or more, making the report especially useful for studying actively practicing evangelicals (Melkonian-Hoover et al. 2024). Alan Cross was also a team member and the researcher for this study in Sacramento, CA.

Why the Studies Belong Together

The World Relief study maps patterns of attitude, engagement, invitation, church influence, and practical barriers across five regions of the United States. *Receiving Faith* dives deeper beneath those patterns by asking how a similar, but smaller group of sustained receivers in Alabama and Northern California became the kind of people who persisted in receiving through barriers and opposition. Together, these studies show that receptivity is neither a simple political attitude nor the result of persuasion or more information alone. It is a process of spiritual and social formation enacted through relationships and practices. The studies also show that debates surrounding immigration and immigrant reception/rejection have largely moved from questions about legality to questions involving identity and belonging.

Major Literature-Review Themes

The dissertation literature review treats evangelical response as multicausal. Historical identity, biblical interpretation, church formation, social identity, moral formation, media, partisan politics, fear and threat perception, race and ethnicity, nationalism, global migration, and hospitality interact rather than operate as isolated variables. Scripture contains a robust theology of the sojourner and hospitality, yet evangelicals also receive strong formative influence from family, media, politics, culture, and lived experience. The 2022 Lifeway data cited in the dissertation illustrate this formative environment: media, Bible, friends/family, and observed or actual contact with immigrants all significantly shape views (Cross 2026; Earls 2022). Core sources: Cross (2026); Melkonian-Hoover et al. (2024).

2. Global Migration, Receptivity, and the Formation of the Receiver

Global migration is not only movement across borders; it changes social and cultural worlds. The literature reviewed in *Receiving Faith* emphasizes diaspora, the religious life migrants carry with them, the transformation of both immigrants and host communities, and variable views of “welcoming the stranger” and responsible governmental order/security. Migration is driven by war, persecution, economic pressures and aspirations, disasters, demographic change, and transnational cultural and family networks, while large-scale movement can also generate populist and nationalist reactions centered increasingly on identity, culture, and belonging rather than legality alone (Cross 2026).

A central literature-review insight is that Christian reception happens in the midst of conflict: the biblical call to “welcome the stranger” is clear, while evangelicals also acknowledge the distinct role of the state, border enforcement, integration, cultural continuity, order, and rule of law. Social Identity Theory explains why immigrants can be categorized as “other” when difference is linked to perceived threat(s). Conversely, contact, friendship, biblical hospitality, shared worship, and common practices can reshape our understanding of belonging (Cross 2026).

Key distinction. Receiving immigrants through ministry is not identical to affirming permissive immigration policies. The World Relief data show that many respondents simultaneously supported welcome, hospitality, and church care for immigrants along with stricter immigration enforcement. This distinction between the church's receiving vocation and the state's ordering vocation is essential for interpreting evangelical attitudes accurately.

What the World Relief Research Found

Finding	Evidence	Implication
Invitation matters	53% of those invited by a friend were currently volunteering with immigrants or refugees, compared with 39% invited by a pastor or church leader and 40% invited by World Relief or a similar org.	Trusted relationships are a major pathway into engagement.
Church environment matters	90% were comfortable with church leaders speaking about immigration; stories and conversations correlated more consistently with positive attitudes than sermons alone.	Formation occurs through a relational congregational environment, not only formal teaching.

Volunteers differ	Volunteers (proximity) reported more positive interactions and saw immigrants more as strengths rather than threats or burdens.	Engagement and positive perception reinforce one another.
Partisanship matters	Republicans were more restrictive, yet 57% said churches have a moral responsibility to help immigrants, even if unlawfully present.	Political identity is powerful but does not fully determine Christian ministry practices.
Policy views are mixed	Large majorities supported stronger border security while many also supported earned legal status and protection for Dreamers.	Desire for both order/security and compassion often coexist in the same individual and church community.
Perception matters	Seeing immigrants as burden, threat, or strength influenced other immigration attitudes.	Narratives, encounters, and relationships shape the moral imagination in many directions.

The combined result is more textured than the familiar binary of 'pro-immigrant' versus 'anti-immigrant.' Evangelicals can be politically and socially conservative, concerned about illegal immigration and border disorder, and still believe churches should receive, serve, and advocate for immigrants with justice, mercy, and humility. The question is therefore not simply how to change opinions, but how churches form people whose Christian identity can govern their response amid competing political and cultural pressures (Melkonian-Hoover et al. 2024).

3. Receiving Faith: How People Become and Remain Receivers

Receiving Faith was a “positive deviancy” study, which means that it explored factors that led a minority (Earls 2022 – 15% of evangelicals nationally) to engage in ongoing immigrant reception contra the overall practice of the majority in their church, family, and community networks. The principle finding is that a lifestyle of sustained reception emerged primarily through spiritual and social identity formation, rather than through persuasion, information downloads, policy argument, or political affirmation. This means that the influence of worship, biblical teachings, family and friends and the ongoing ministry of the local church in relationship with immigrants new to their communities are key to developing receiving faith in people over time. Participants were gradually reshaped through worship, relationships with immigrants, perseverance through barriers, and repeated practices of hospitality. The four observed movements below are interlocking and mutually reinforcing rather than a fixed sequence. They also have a clear biblical basis in Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians (Cross 2026).

Receiving Faith Matrix: A Spiritual and Social Identity Formation Framework

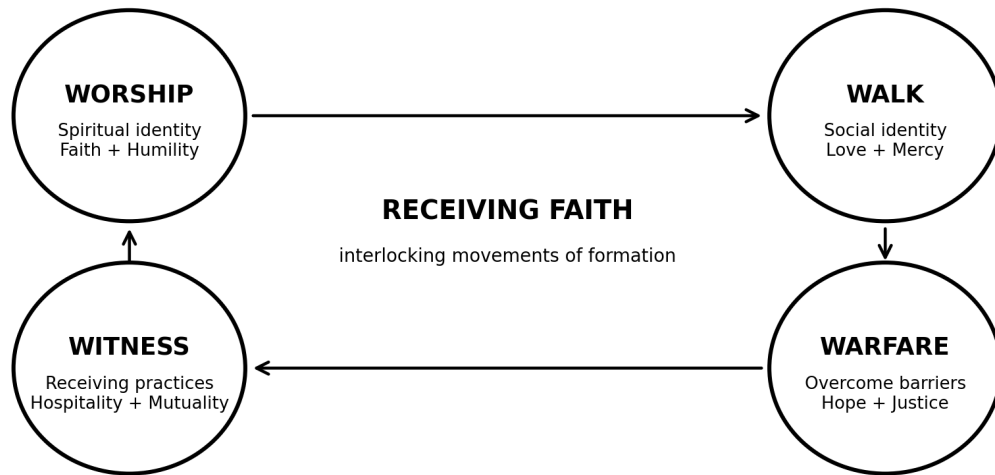


Figure 1. Receiving Faith Matrix, Cross (2026).

Worship - Spiritual Identity – What Is God Doing?

Receivers saw immigrants through their understanding of God, Scripture, the gospel, the church, and God's work among the nations. Biblical conviction became more than an opinion: it shaped who participants understood themselves to be. Worship locates reception inside Christian identity rather than partisan identity. Eph. 1-3.

Walk - Social Identity – Who Am I? Where Do I Belong?

Receivers developed relational knowledge. Immigrants became friends, church members, coworkers, neighbors, guests, and family-like members of a shared community. Social identity changed as proximity became relationship and relationship became mutuality. The World Relief study independently found that stories, conversations, invitations, and positive encounters were associated with greater engagement and more positive views. Eph. 3:14-21; chps 4-6:9.

Warfare – Identifying and Overcoming Barriers to Receiving

Every Receiving Faith participant encountered barriers: language, fear, cultural and racial/ethnic differences, political influence, hostility, stereotypes, indifference, media influence, and concerns about security or legality. 'Warfare' does not mean fighting people; it describes identifying and resisting barriers that prevent faithful reception. The key finding was persistence: formed identity became stronger than the environmental pressure to withdraw. Eph. 1:15-23; 6:10-18.

Witness – Holistic Practices of Reception

Reception became visible through table fellowship, hospitality, friendship, worship together, English-language support, tutoring, service, advocacy, inviting immigrants into homes and lives, and building reciprocal relationships. Receiving Faith is therefore both a formation process and a lived outcome: a durable way of receiving others into church and community. Eph. 2:11-22; 3:7-13; 6:19-20.

Research synthesis. The World Relief study shows that many Christians are willing but inactive; Receiving Faith helps explain what moves willingness toward a durable lifestyle. The bridge is not merely more information. It is identity + relationship + perseverance + practice.

4. What Makes Reception Difficult - and How Common Life Becomes Possible

Barriers Among Host People

The World Relief survey found that non-engagement was often practical rather than ideological: lack of time (54%), language barriers (29%), concern about migrants' legal status (20%), lack of accessible opportunities (20%), fear of cross-cultural misunderstanding (12%), compassion fatigue (11%), and negative experiences with migrants (9%). Regional interviews added lack of training, uncertainty about where to connect, politics, media influence, fear, and weak church focus. *Receiving Faith* adds deeper barriers of social categorization, racial/ethnic difference, perceived cultural threat, nationalism, and the difficulty of maintaining hospitality amid opposition (Cross 2026; Melkonian-Hoover et al. 2024).

These findings caution against assuming that every hesitant Christian is motivated by hostility. Some barriers should be confronted as falsehood or prejudice; others require training, time, accessible opportunities, language support, honest policy discussion, or greater confidence. Formation works best when people can name real concerns without fear of immediate moral categorization.

The Migrant's Role: Integration, Reciprocity, and Participation

Receiving Faith primarily studied host people, so it does not claim a comprehensive theory of immigrant integration. Its literature review and immigrant interviews nevertheless point toward reciprocal common life. Nancy Fox's work, cited in the dissertation, describes integration as mutuality rather than a 'melting pot': newcomers retain meaningful identity while increasingly contributing to a common social 'broth' involving shared life together. Immigrant participants in *Receiving Faith* described the benefits of leaving isolation, accepting invitations into host churches/communities, forming friendships, serving others, and eventually becoming receivers themselves (Cross 2026; Fox 2015). A joint observation from the literature, receiver interviews in California/Alabama, and immigrant interviews, show a process of learning, adapting to, and honoring shared civic/cultural values developed historically by the host people is helpful for healthy integration.

The Sacramento Portion of the World Relief Report, of which Cross was the lead researcher, also found that many respondents wanted immigrants to come lawfully, integrate into and honor the society and culture they were entering, while still believing churches should welcome and minister to them. Taken together, the research supports reciprocal obligations: host people make room, protect dignity, build bridges, and invite participation; migrants learn how the host society works, respect its laws and legitimate civic order, build relationships beyond their own enclave, contribute their gifts, and participate in shared community. Integration is neither coerced cultural erasure nor parallel isolation. It is the construction of a new common life through mutual giving and receiving. And this work of integration leads to the embrace of shared cultural values that make life together possible. The host people set the table for this through their inherited culture, law, and values, and doors are open and invitations extended for immigrant newcomers to find their own seat at the table.

Ordered Mercy: a Public Framework

ORDERED MERCY: all three goods remain in relationship



Figure 2. Ordered Mercy, adapted from Cross (2026), Thom Wolf's *Lifecode/Pattern* (2010), and Richard Land's SBC Immigration Framework (2011).

The concept of **Ordered Mercy** translates the dissertation's formation findings into public moral reasoning. Drawing on Micah 6:8, Thom Wolf's *Lifecode/Pattern* (Wolf 2010) as an interpretive framework, and Richard Land's SBC Immigration Framework (Land 2011), it holds Justice, Mercy, and Humility together. Justice includes lawful order, security, due process, fairness, and accountability. Mercy insists on human dignity, compassion, hospitality, family care, and protection of the vulnerable. Humility recognizes limits, listens to legitimate concerns, rejects ethnic superiority and dehumanization, and calls host and newcomer toward mutual responsibility and shared civic values. All three spheres must work together.

The 2026 SBC Immigration Resolution as an example of the Ordered Mercy Framework

The Southern Baptist Convention's (SBC) 2026 resolution, *On Immigration, Human Dignity, and the Rule of Law*, provides a concrete public expression of the Justice-Mercy-Humility balance. It affirms the image of God and hospitality; secure borders, immigration enforcement, due process, and an orderly and credible system; care for children and families; rejection of nativism, racial hostility, ethno-nationalism, and dehumanizing rhetoric; religious liberty; and a call for churches to minister among immigrants and refugees while seeking one another's good through shared civic values. In that sense, the resolution provides an example of a way forward using the Justice-Mercy-Humility logic that correlates with the research.

2026 Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) Resolution On Immigration, Human Dignity, and the Rule of Law

WHEREAS, God created every human being in his image and calls his people to show justice, mercy, hospitality, and love toward the vulnerable and the stranger, affirming the worth and dignity of every person regardless of ethnicity or national origin (Genesis 1:26-27; Deuteronomy 10:18-19; Leviticus 19:34; Matthew 25:35; Ephesians 2:14-19); and

WHEREAS, For more than eighty years the Southern Baptist Convention has addressed refugees, displaced persons, immigrants, and those fleeing war, persecution, atrocities, and genocide by affirming both compassionate ministry and the responsibility of governments to maintain lawful order, secure borders, and implement humane immigration systems (Isaiah 1:17; Micah 6:8; Romans 13:1-7); and

WHEREAS, Southern Baptists reject racism, nativism, ethnic supremacy, and dehumanizing rhetoric, affirming that Scripture alone defines our identity, worth, and unity in Christ and that no person bearing the image of God should be reduced to a slur, statistic, or political problem (Galatians 3:28; Colossians 4:6; James 2:1-4); and

WHEREAS, Large-scale and often disorderly migration has strained communities, harmed migrants and American citizens, and diminished confidence in the rule of law, underscoring the need for immigration systems marked by order, clarity, due process, timely adjudication, integrity in asylum processes, fairness, and humane enforcement (Proverbs 31:8-9; Zechariah 7:9-10); and

WHEREAS, While immigration through means that violate American law has been and continues to be a problem, many immigrants and refugees have carefully followed the proper procedures for entering the nation lawfully; and

WHEREAS, Southern Baptist churches include men and women of numerous ethnicities and are positioned to bear faithful gospel witness through ministries of hospitality, discipleship, practical service, and Christ-centered community that strengthen both Great Commission effectiveness and the peace of our communities (Jeremiah 29:7; Matthew 28:18-20; Hebrews 13:2; Rev 7:9); and

WHEREAS, Leaders representing diverse Southern Baptist ethnic fellowships have recently affirmed the importance of compassionate and lawful immigration policies, dignifying language, religious liberty, and gospel-centered ministry to immigrant and refugee communities; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED, That the messengers to the Southern Baptist Convention Annual Meeting in Orlando, Florida, June 9-10, 2026, reaffirm our longstanding conviction that every human being possesses God-given worth and dignity as an image-bearer of God (Genesis 1:26-27); and be it further

RESOLVED, That the church is called to faithful gospel proclamation, love of neighbor, hospitality to the stranger, and making disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:18-20; Luke 10:25-37); and be it further

RESOLVED, That we reaffirm the call to pray for governing authorities as they lead the civil government in carrying out its responsibility to secure borders, enforce immigration laws, maintain an orderly and credible immigration system, and pursue clear, enforceable, and humane policies that uphold both justice and mercy, recognizing that the government is not the church and the church is not the state, though both remain accountable to God for the stewardship of their distinct callings (Micah 6:8; Romans 13:1-7; 1 Timothy 2:1-2); and be it further

RESOLVED, That we reaffirm support for lawful immigration enforcement carried out justly, humanely, and according to due process, including the removal of those whom the government duly prioritizes for deportation and accountability for criminal activity, human trafficking, and unlawful employment practices; and be it further

RESOLVED, That we reject amnesty, understood as forgiveness of legal violations without accountability; and be it further

RESOLVED, That we also reject nativism, racial or ethnic hostility, ethno-nationalism, discrimination, and all ideologies or rhetoric that deny the equal worth and dignity of any people group regardless of immigration status, while also affirming that Christian compassion and hospitality do not negate lawful order or excuse indifference to public justice and social peace (Ephesians 2:14-19; Hebrews 13:2); and be it further

RESOLVED, That we exhort the government to take particular care of children and families, insisting upon respect for the God-given worth and dignity of every person and the religious liberty of churches to minister freely (Zech. 7:9-10; Matt. 19:14); and be it finally

RESOLVED, That we encourage Southern Baptist churches to strengthen faithful gospel ministry among immigrants and refugees, and seek one another's good through shared civic values, practical service, and Christ-centered community as we proclaim the gospel to people from every tribe, tongue, and nation (Matthew 25:35; Revelation 7:9).

Practical landing. The research does not require a single immigration policy platform. It does suggest that sustainable Christian engagement must be able to protect the vulnerable, tell the truth about disorder, uphold lawful institutions, reject dehumanization, cultivate reciprocal integration, and form churches whose welcome survives political cycles.

5. Strategic Implications for Churches, Leaders, and Global Strategy

First, anyone involved in immigrant ministry or advocacy should seek to measure formation, not just opinion. Immigration receptivity is better understood by asking who people are becoming, what relationships they sustain, what obstacles they have learned to work through, and what sustainable practices help lead to receiving through barriers. A favorable survey response without relationship may remain fragile; repeated receiving practices can become part of a person's identity.

Second, create relational pathways. Trusted invitations, stories, conversations, shared meals, service teams, cross-cultural worship, and accessible local opportunities to engage and serve alongside others should be treated as central formation practices rather than supplements to teaching. The World Relief study shows that invitation and church participation and practice matter; *Receiving Faith* shows why sustained relationship can alter social identity.

Third, address fear and policy concerns rather than bypassing them. Churches should distinguish dehumanizing stereotypes from legitimate questions about legality, border security, capacity, integration, public order, and social trust. *Ordered Mercy* provides a way to engage these questions alongside the biblical obligations of upholding human dignity, participating in appropriate rhetoric, welcoming hospitality, and protection. Hearing legitimate concerns and providing a forum to discuss those concerns without fear of rejection can aid in decreasing polarization and potential radicalization toward various extremes.

Fourth, practice mutuality. Host people are not merely givers and migrants are not merely recipients. Healthy immigrant reception creates reciprocal relationships in which newcomers become participants and contributors with their welcomers, while established communities are also honored and enriched. Welcoming implies that there is an existing and viable place/community/nation that already exists. That place should be honored while newcomers are simultaneously welcomed and included. Both isolation and domination from either side of the equation work against integration.

Finally, build for the long haul. Global migration will continue to intersect with war, persecution, economics, demographic change, nationalism, nativism, and political volatility. Christian receptivity therefore needs a formation architecture sturdy enough to outlast a news, election, or economic cycle: The approach is Worship + Walk + Warfare = Witness, lived publicly through Justice + Mercy + Humility for everyone, host peoples and immigrants alike.

Summary thesis. Evangelical reception of immigrants is not best explained or sustained by persuasion alone. It grows when Christian identity, relational proximity, perseverance through barriers, and embodied hospitality reinforce one another. Public engagement becomes more durable when justice, mercy, and humility remain in relationship, and when host people and migrants both participate in building a lawful, hospitable, and shared common life together.

Selected works cited

- Cross, Alan. 2026. "Receiving Faith: An Exploration Into Factors That Shape American Evangelical Response to and Reception of Immigrants in the Local Church." Doctor of Global Leadership dissertation, Fuller School of Mission and Theology. ProQuest 32705172.
- Earls, Aaron. 2022. "Lifeway Research: American Evangelicals Want Balanced Approach to Immigration." *Baptist Press*, September 27, 2022.
- Fox, Nancy T. 2015. "Refugees and Church Resettlement Ministry Volunteers: Intercultural Companions on a Journey in Shalom." Doctor of Missiology dissertation, Fuller Theological Seminary.
- Glanville, Mark R., and Luke Glanville. 2021. *Refuge Reimagined: Biblical Kinship in Global Politics*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.
- Hanciles, Jehu J. 2008. *Beyond Christendom: Globalization, African Migration, and the Transformation of the West*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
- Land, Richard. 2011. "A Just, Fair, and Compassionate Immigration Policy." *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 9 (1: Christian Perspectives on US Immigration Policy).
- Melkonian-Hoover, Ruth, Brian Newman, Jamie Goodwin, Alan Cross, Stacy Keogh, Ryan Klejment-Lavin, and Wayne Denny. 2024. "Evangelical Perspectives on Immigrants, Immigration, and Engagement: Implications for Congregations. Comprehensive Research Report." World Relief. Terry McGonigal, advisor.
- Pohl, Christine D. 1999. *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- Rapoport, Hillel, Sulin Sardoschau, and Arthur Slive. 2020. "Migration and Cultural Change," Working Papers 2020-10, CEPR research center. Munich Society for the Promotion of Economic Research - CESifo. Research on migration and cultural remittances cited and synthesized in Cross (2026).
- Southern Baptist Convention. 2026. "On Immigration, Human Dignity, and the Rule of Law." Resolution adopted at the Southern Baptist Convention Annual Meeting, Orlando, Florida, June 9-10, 2026.
- Tajfel, Henri, and John C. Turner. 1979. "An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict." In *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, edited by William G. Austin and Stephen Worchel. Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- Wolf, Thom. 2010. "Lifecode: An Examination of the Shape, the Nature, and the Usage of the Oikoscode, a Replicative Nonformal Learning Pattern of Ethical Education for Leadership and Community Groups." Doctor of Philosophy, Andrews University. As cited and applied in Cross (2026).

Note on scope: Receiving Faith used purposeful positive-deviance sampling and does not claim statistical generalizability to all evangelicals. The World Relief survey was drawn from congregations relationally connected to World Relief and likewise should not be treated as a nationally representative probability sample. The strength of the synthesis lies in the convergence of multi-region descriptive data from diverse sites across the United States with in-depth qualitative evidence about formation, belief, and practice.