



Words Matter

After more than 70 years of serving refugees, immigrants, and other people affected by our historical era's intensifying pace of migration, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS) finds itself facing a remarkable dilemma with terminology. There are no longer words that wholly fit for the people who are at the heart of our mission. In the course of our strategic planning process we have struggled to find language for our strategic statements that our stakeholders can embrace and that the general public understands and finds inviting. We have learned that there is much to dislike with almost every option. Why exactly is it so difficult to find the right words?

Perhaps our struggle is an indication of just how fraught refugee and immigration issues are in the world today. Politics is an inextricable factor behind refugee flight and refugee protection, while migration, whether sanctioned or irregular, voluntary or forced, is a flaring hot-button issue in the political realm. The language used to describe people on the move is tainted by the ugliness of the public debates that determine their fates, and debased by the contempt and anger expressed by those who fear or resist the changes overtaking their communities. Different terms may suggest criminality, marginalization, permanent uprootedness, or poverty, conditions that are not only derogatory but threatening to those who are making new lives.

For people who have experienced migration, there are also stark emotional resonances attached to words that may evoke the loss, vulnerability, or loneliness they have endured. And because so many cultural and historical experiences are represented within the uprooted population, words that may be benign or welcome to some are hurtful or offensive to others.

Furthermore, the technical language of migration is at odds with the common everyday meanings and connotations of the terms used to describe different categories of people. U.S. immigration law is often described as more complicated than the tax code, and the international dimensions of migration add layers of intricacy. For practitioners the nuances matter a great deal, while lay people have difficulty distinguishing one category from another.

For all of these reasons, it is clear that there will be no language that works for every audience and in every situation. LIRS will need to make choices and will have to draw people into dialogue to help overcome the inevitable confusions and negative implications associated with the words that we choose. The choices we make must certainly attend to and speak to our audiences, as well as describe who we are and what we want to be as an organization. Presented below is some context for the choices we must make in this regard.

Technical vs. Everyday Language

There are dozens of terms used to describe people who have left one country for another. Among them: emigrant, immigrant, special immigrant, migrant, nonimmigrant, foreigner, settler, seasonal worker, guest worker, temporary worker, permanent resident, foreign national, alien, illegal alien, illegal, undocumented immigrant, visa overstayer, visitor, tourist, asylum-seeker, asylee, displaced person, refugee. Some are in common parlance; many have specific meaning under law. In the United States critical distinctions are drawn in technical language between people who reside here with legal status and those who do not, and between those who are here permanently with a path to citizenship, and those who are here temporarily.

Without immersing ourselves in lawyer-speak, the rough understanding in law is that an “immigrant” is a person with the legal status to live permanently in the United States. In our U.S. context “refugee” refers to a person who has been granted refugee status and, if resettled, has been admitted to the United States with that status and its attendant benefits (modest as those are). “Migrant” is a more encompassing term covering people who move from one country to another for any of a variety of reasons.

However, in everyday language these distinctions (and the many others that apply) may be significantly blurred. Almost any foreign-born person who intends to live for a time in the United States is called an “immigrant”, whether authorized or not. Or, in some circles, labeled an “illegal,” whether authorized or not. Because of the demographics of migration, either term might be used by native-born people for others who look different, even if those persons are citizens and multigeneration Americans. The word “refugee” can be used to refer to any person forced to migrate for any reason, with or without status, or is used interchangeably with the word “immigrant.” “Migrants” are often understood to be agricultural workers, not necessarily foreign-born, and are frequently taken to be people experiencing economic deprivation. Because of the imprecision and power of everyday language, terms with a particular legal meaning carry political, emotional or other potentially charged connotations that must be considered by LIRS.

Historically, LIRS sidestepped some of the terminology problems by opting to use language with Biblical resonance in our mission statement. However, the last LIRS strategic plan (2004-2009) used the phrase “refugees and migrants” in both the vision statement and goal language. People who are biblically literate recognize the phrase “welcome the stranger.” Increasingly, though, as LIRS seeks to extend our reach and invitation, this language of the Bible may not be familiar, or is outweighed by secular connotations. The current LIRS mission statement includes the phrase, “we welcome the stranger,” and our stakeholders have increasingly noted that the word “stranger” is off-putting.

As a matter of further confusion in this area, the complexity of human migration is straining even the technical definitions. Some global regions (Africa, Latin America) have developed protections for more encompassing categories of people than included in the Refugee Convention, and are stretching international understanding. More recently, attention paid to the phenomenon of mixed migratory flows has made clear the multiple causes for flight or cross-border movement that can be found in the experiences of even within one individual, making simple labels exceedingly difficult to assign. Additionally, emerging pressures from climate change, environmental degradation and overpopulation are causing forced migration that has not yet been codified as other forms of migration have been.

International Usage

Organizations with an international perspective are more likely to use the term “migrant” for people who move from one country to another voluntarily or for economic reasons. In part, this is because there are few options for permanent legal immigration in many parts of the world, so the term “immigrant” is less relevant. Focusing on “migration” rather than “immigration” also signals an organization’s broader understanding of the global movement of people, and its grasp of the interconnectedness of the phenomenon in the United States with wider trends. Using it is an act of international solidarity.

Many of the peer organizations that LIRS interacts with have adopted the international usage, and thus their strategic statements speak of “migration” and “migrants.” Examples include Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and the International Catholic Migration Commission. Similarly, think-tanks with an international orientation use this language (Migration Policy Institute). Some faith-based organizations with strong international connections include the term in their names: the Migration and Refugee Service of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, and Episcopal Migration Ministries, to name two of our closest colleagues.

Here in the United States, both because of our long and vigorous history of immigration and as a reflection of attitudes of exceptionalism, the more commonly accepted terms are clearly “immigrant” and “immigration.” These words are more accessible to more people, require less explanation, and avoid the confusing connotations carried by the term “migrant.” However, it should be noted that some of our

stakeholders have expressed greater comfort with the term “migration” than with the word “migrant,” and this should be considered in the final word choice.

The Problem with Labels

Not all labels are necessarily experienced negatively. In the work that we do, some of the terms for people who have crossed borders convey the sense of a benefit or protection that has been provided. Once someone is technically a “refugee,” he or she falls under the international protection mandate and cannot be treated as a mere “migrant,” shipped back to whatever country will receive the person. Similarly, to be an “immigrant” is to have a quite desirable legal status.

Nevertheless, many of the words used to refer to people at the heart of the LIRS mission are problematic, and tend to confer the sense of an immutable identity rather than a temporary condition, thus undermining the central project of mutual integration. The challenge has been to find a turn of phrase that functions effectively in ordinary language.

One of the strong suggestions to emerge from our conversations with stakeholders is to explore a phrase that builds on “people.” Our Catholic colleagues, for example, have used the phrase, “people on the move”, which is exceedingly broad. A number of other options are open to us (people who have been displaced, people who have been uprooted, people who have been forced to migrate, etc.), each with implications regarding the voluntariness of the migration, the connectedness of the person, and many other characteristics of the movement across borders and the affected individual. The mission implications of our word choice make the task of finding the best words challenging.

Mission Implications

Embedded in our choice of words are implications for who is included in our circle of concern, and what core activities we carry out in our ministries of service and justice. A number of stakeholders have suggested that LIRS focus on people who have been forced to migrate. Increasingly, however, we have expanded LIRS’s role or responsibility toward people who migrate in order to reunite with family, which is not coerced. Many of our most engaged Lutheran colleagues in immigration task forces or at the Be Not Afraid sites, or who have spoken up in communities impacted by raids, are extremely concerned about family separation, and LIRS has historically been a strong advocate for family unity. Thus, limiting our circle of concern to those impacted by forced migration would potentially turn us away from a population of deep concern to our churches.

Questions have also been raised about whether we should highlight the primacy of our work with refugees in our language by referring to them first (i.e., “refugees and migrants”), and whether we should refer to refugees at all. In answering this, it is important to consider our history with refugee resettlement, the priorities of the congregations and communities with whom we partner, and our sense of the future place we wish to claim. The direction clearly emerging from our recent history and the strategic planning process is that LIRS is an organization broadly responsive to the challenges of migration in the United States and the impact on at-risk populations, with a long history rooted in resettling refugees and a large and highly-regarded government-funded refugee resettlement program. The formulation of “migrants and refugees” captures our broader mandate, as well as our deep commitment to and engagement with refugees.

Conclusion

Although words matter, there are no words that exactly fit or perfectly serve our ends. Every choice will compel us to begin a conversation, and to address head-on the challenges of terminology—to educate and to learn. As the best of the compromised options, we offer the phrase “migrants and refugees” because of its more encompassing implications, its stance of international solidarity, and its recognition of the commitment we have made to refugees throughout the history of this organization.