

January 24, 2022

Open Letter to Governor Ron DeSantis and the Florida Legislature

We write to you with grave concern that the State of Florida is taking up a public policy that makes children unwelcome here. Such a thought makes us shudder, and yet that seems the plain meaning of the recent executive order banning federally protected unaccompanied children and pending legislation on “unauthorized aliens”.

Our churches focus on children for good reason. The morality of our society is judged by how we care for children. One of the most famous stories of Jesus speaks directly to this point:

Some people were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch them. But the disciples rebuked those who brought them. When Jesus saw this, he became furious and told them, "Let the little children come to me, and stop keeping them away, because the kingdom of God belongs to people like these. I tell you with certainty, whoever doesn't receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." Then after he had hugged the children, he tenderly blessed them as he laid his hands on them. (Mark 10:13-16 ISV)

The Church understands itself as the Body of Christ in the world today. One of our core identities and faith practices is taking care of children, most especially children in distress. Caring for unaccompanied minors is integral to our self-understanding. As the Church, we feel under attack from the State of Florida. The childcare and foster care licenses of agencies and foster parents have not been renewed if they have previously received unaccompanied children. Pending legislation such as SB 1808 would potentially forbid much of the immigrant and refugee ministries we engage in, either directly or through the agencies we support, by banning the transportation of such persons by common carrier.

Unaccompanied children are present in Florida as recipients of federally provided immigration status under the *William Wilberforce Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act* (TVPRA). This law stipulates that the U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) transfer unaccompanied minors from non-contiguous countries through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) into the custody of the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR). ORR utilizes its refugee resettlement network to place these children with properly licensed local childcare providers—including faith-based organizations that our houses of worship sponsor and partner with—to provide temporary care in shelters or with foster families until the child reunites with their vetted and approved family member or sponsor. By blocking the issuance and renewal of these state licenses, the State of Florida prevents churches from fulfilling their mission to welcome and care for children. Moreover, the policy will exacerbate the current crisis in the lack of foster parents and childcare agencies.

Because caring for the “least of these” is a core value of the Church, we experience this executive order and the threat of the pending legislation as religious persecution and a restriction on our freedom to worship. We sincerely hope that the State does not intend to persecute the Church or restrict its freedom to worship God in word and deed. Therefore, we implore Governor DeSantis and the 2022 Legislature to reconsider their actions and make a way for us to welcome children as Jesus would.

In faithfulness to God,

Rev. Dr. Ángel Marcial

President of FRACEEV

(Florida Fellowship of Hispanic Councils and Evangelical Institutions / Represents 2,500 churches in FL)

Dr. Rev. Saturnino Gonzalez - Assemblies of God, Multicultural District

Vice-President of FRACEEV (Florida Fellowship of Hispanic Councils & Evangelical Institutions)

Rev. David Rivera

Senior Pastor of Iglesia de Dios Pentecostal M.I. -Tampa

Rece Illean Caraballo

President of Ministers Association of Central Florida (AMEFC)

Rev. Ivan García

President of Ministers Association of Tampa (FRAME)

Bishop Pedro Suarez

Florida-Bahamas Synod Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Rev. Dr. Raymond Johnson

President, Florida Council of Churches

Coordinator, Florida Cooperative Baptist Fellowship

Rev. Dr. Russell L. Meyer

Executive Director, Florida Council of Churches

Agustin Quiles

President & CEO, Mission Talk – Clermont