

Immigration Policies--A Report to the Commission on General Conference

The Commission on the General Conference (Commission) is responsible for the logistical and procedural planning of the General Conference. Beyond logistics, the Commission works to create an effective and positive process for the entire General Conference experience. As a Commission, we strive to provide a place for holy conferencing that allows the ministry of The UMC to move forward, while also caring for the body, mind and soul of attendees. This task is layered and complicated in every quadrennium, but it is especially challenging in the current political and social landscape of the US. The following is a quick summary of some basic policies and current enforcement practices that may have a bearing on the work of planning and holding General Conference 2028.

Visa Guidelines and Policy: Effective September 2025, the U.S. Department of State has initiated new guidelines that place a greater emphasis on national security, resulting in stricter, increased vetting for visa applications. The new policies have led to longer processing times, the elimination of most interview waivers, and will result in greater numbers of denials.

- **Stricter scrutiny on all levels:** Non-immigrant visa applicants undergo two distinct levels of vetting: one conducted by the Department of State (DOS) at a U.S. embassy abroad and a second conducted by Customs and Border Protection (CBP) at a U.S. port of entry. A visa grant from the embassy simply gets one to the border, where there is another level of vetting.
- **Increased Vetting of Social Media Accounts:** DOS conducts social media vetting for visa applicants, requiring them to provide social media handles from the past five years on their visa application forms allowing for increased scrutiny into fraud, anti-US and antisemitic beliefs and activities. This can lead to denial or extended administrative processing, which increases wait time.
- **Application Location:** Visa applicants must apply at a U.S. embassy or consulate in their country of citizenship or residence, superseding prior practices that allowed third-country applications.
- **Visa Interview:** Most non-immigrant visa now requires in person interview, with few exceptions. This will greatly affect availability of interview slots worldwide, and timeline for processing.
- **Cost:** Effective October 1, 2025, there will be a “visa integrity fee” of \$250 added to the visa application cost of \$185, for a total of \$435.
- **Visa Bond:** Additionally, there is a “visa bond,” that is being administered in a pilot program aimed at discouraging visa violations from Malawi and Zambia. This program requires citizens from these nations applying for B-1 or B-2 visas to post a refundable bond between \$5,000 and \$15,000. The U.S. Department of State has indicated an inclination to add more countries to this list in the future.

Immigration Enforcement Policies In the US: Immigration policies intersect issues of national security and individual rights. In practice, enforcement measures can place heavier burdens on certain communities based on race, ethnicity, language, or country of origin. General Conference is a diverse gathering encompassing the intersectionality of many of these communities. Because of this, the following actions by enforcement agencies within the United States may inform the work of the Commission:

- **Mass Raids and Deportation:** The current immigration policies greatly increase enforcement, detention, and mass deportation. Immigration & Customs Enforcement (ICE) is now raiding and detaining immigrants across the country. ICE is targeting immigrants who have final orders of removal or criminal convictions, but the raids often lead to collateral arrests meaning anyone in the vicinity who is presumed undocumented can be targeted and detained.
- **Profiling Practices:** The recent U.S. Supreme Court decision allows immigration authorities broader discretion in conducting raids and sweeps, including the use of racial profiling.
- **Increase in Budget Allocation:** The allocation of \$170 billion by Congress is expected to significantly increase the scale of enforcement activities, including raids, sweeps, and detentions.
- **Immigration Enforcement can enter Public Spaces as well as “Sensitive Location:”** ICE agents can enter public areas that are opened to the public without a judicial warrant. This includes hotels, convention centers, restaurants, businesses, and any space where individuals do not have a reasonable expectation of privacy. This includes entering “sensitive locations” such as hospitals, schools, and places of worship. Individuals’ rights under the fourth amendment of the US Constitution in these locations hinges significantly on what is “public” versus “private” space.