

## **40 Days of Prayer—Lenten Focus on Refugees**

### **Week 6: Central America**

**The current situation:** Widespread unchecked gang violence and organized crime have made Central America's Northern Triangle (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras) one of the most dangerous regions in the world, forcing people to flee in numbers unseen since the civil wars here in the 1980s. According to the UN Refugee Agency, asylum applications from these three countries increased 597 percent from 2010 to 2015, the majority to Mexico and the US. Between 2015 and 2016, over 180,000 Central American children and families fleeing violence were apprehended at the US-Mexico border.

The inability of the Northern Triangle countries to halt gang activity—in large part due to the complicity and corruption of police, military, private security, paramilitary groups, and government officials—has left people unprotected. In many neighborhoods, gangs extort a “war tax” or “rent” from business owners by threatening death, harm to their families, or burning down their businesses or houses. Children and youth are similarly pressured to participate in gangs as lookouts, traffickers, or full-fledged gang members. Young women and girls are threatened with rape or forced into prostitution or into relationships with gang members. In communities where gangs have control, everyday decisions like which road to walk on or whether to attend school can be a life or death decision. In 2014 and 2015 in El Salvador, at least 60,000 children left the country or dropped out of school because of violence.

Other factors contributing to Central American migration are a severe, years-long drought that is exacerbating economic and food insecurity in rural communities, especially for subsistence farmers and day laborers; and displacement by large-scale development projects for mining, tourism, banana and palm plantations, hydroelectric dams, and garment factories.

**How did the gangs and organized crime get control?** During the 1980s, El Salvador and Guatemala experienced vicious civil wars between US-backed military dictatorships and leftist guerrilla groups, while Honduras served as a staging ground for US-based Contras fighting Nicaragua's Sandinista government. After the wars ended, severe poverty, lack of opportunity, and government dysfunction, combined with mass deportations of thousands of Central Americans who had become gang members in LA, provided fertile ground for development of a criminal culture, which grew to include transnational drug-trafficking cartels, domestic organized crime groups, transnational gangs, and street gangs.

#### **What to pray for:**

- Value for human life in a region with the highest homicide rate in the world outside of an active war zone: 33,000 people have been murdered in the past two years.

- Integrity for the region's governments, so they can lead their nations toward a future that allows people to safely stay in their communities.
- Protection for truth tellers and human rights activists, whom are often targets of intimidation and assassination.
- Safety and strength for migrants on the 1,800-mile journey through Mexico to the US, risking hunger and thirst, overexposure, violence, kidnapping, and extortion along the way.
- Compassion for the emotional pain and insecurity of those who have left a home behind them not knowing what kind of home might be ahead of them.
- Willingness to understand the root causes of immigration and our country's immigration policies.
- Courage to be generous, just, and welcoming to those from other lands, cultures, and religions, that we may live in human solidarity.

*For more information see United Methodist Women resources on immigration, American Immigration Council, Latin America Working Group, Amnesty International, and WOLA: Advocacy for Human Rights in the Americas.*