

## Lenten Refugee Moment, Week 6: Central America

April 9, 2017

We began this series as a challenge to the church to embrace a broader definition of neighbor—beyond human-made borders of family, community, race, religion, and country—to walk for a while with some of the most vulnerable people in the world. We've traveled to Syria, Afghanistan, Somalia, Burma, and Palestine, and we close the series today with the humanitarian crisis spilling across our own southern border, to people who literally *are* our neighbors. Contrary to what some politicians are saying, the majority of these migrants are not Mexicans but Central Americans, making their way *through* Mexico to the United States. In fact, according to the Pew Research Center, more Mexicans are now leaving the US than coming here.<sup>1-4</sup>

Central Americans are fleeing because the so-called Northern Triangle of El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala is the deadliest region in the world after Syria. In 2015 the murder rate per 100,000 people was 103 in El Salvador, 57 in Honduras, and 30 in Guatemala.<sup>5</sup> In the US that year it was 5—22 times lower than El Salvador's.<sup>6</sup>

Organized crime and gangs are largely to blame for the violence, but they operate with the cooperation and often the assistance of police, military, and private security officers, paramilitary groups, and government officials—an environment of corruption that grew out of desperate poverty and lack of opportunity after the region's brutal civil wars in the 1980s.<sup>7</sup> Organized crime here includes transnational criminal organizations, many associated with drug trafficking; domestic organized crime groups; street gangs; and transnational gangs. The region's largest transnational gangs were formed in Los Angeles: the 18<sup>th</sup> Street Gang in the 1960s by Mexican youth, and Mara Salvatrucha in the 1980s by Salvadorans who had fled the civil war in their home country. Following large-scale deportations from the United States of undocumented immigrants with criminal records in the mid-1990s, many deportees who'd been exposed to gang culture in the US recreated it in the country of their birth. It's estimated that the 18<sup>th</sup> Street Gang and Salvatruchas now may have as many as 85,000 members combined.<sup>8,9</sup>

Rampant extortion and threats of rape or execution in this region force families to choose between complying with gangs, fleeing, or dying. In many neighborhoods, gangs extort payments from shop owners and bus and taxi drivers by threatening them with death, harm to their families, or burning down their businesses or houses.<sup>10,11,12</sup>

Maynor, age 30, now in a refugee shelter in Mexico, used to drive a taxi in Tegucigalpa, the capital of Honduras, but half his income went to gangs for protection. "We taxistas are screwed," he said. "You either pay the *marerros* (gangsters) or they kill you."<sup>13</sup>

Beatings and rape of women are common and almost never reported for fear of retribution. Young women and girls are often forced to be gang members' girlfriends, or forced into prostitution. Children and youth are pressured to work for gangs or to become members. To resist is a death sentence. In the first three months of 2016, over 400 children were murdered in El Salvador alone, often at the hands of police working with the gangs.<sup>14</sup>

At another migrant shelter in Mexico, Adilene, a young mother of three, shared this story: "It was never my intention to leave my country. In El Salvador I had a business. It was pretty big. My children's father got involved with gangsters. First he received a death threat so he went away and left us on our own. He didn't care about the problems we were going to have or anything like that. He left and they started to ask me where he was. They asked over and over. I was the wife so I should know. They took my business. They took my house. They beat me. I was in the hospital for 8 days. But I never imagined that I was pregnant. Because during that time they raped me. After all that they said be grateful we didn't kill you. Leave, and if you come back we *will* kill you."<sup>15</sup>

Other factors contributing to Central American migration are poverty from lack of job opportunities and fair wages by international companies and sweatshops; economic losses from a long drought, particularly in rural communities; and displacement by large-scale development projects for mining, tourism, banana and palm plantations, hydroelectric dams, and garment factories.<sup>16,17,18</sup> Since 2009 when a military-backed coup d'état ousted populist president Manuel Zelaya in Honduras, 127 permits have been issued for hydroelectric dams and 950 mining permits have been issued.<sup>19</sup> Those who resist theft of their land and extraction of their natural resources do so knowing they are risking their lives; since 2009 at least 123 land and environmental defenders have been killed in Honduras, including Berta Cáceres last year.<sup>20</sup> Cáceres was the 2015 winner of the prestigious Goldman environmental prize for her work against the Agua Zarca hydroelectric dam.<sup>21</sup>

As a result many Central Americans feel their only choice, to protect themselves or their children, is to seek a life elsewhere. So, they sell their land or their homes or whatever they have, to pay someone to take them north. It used to cost \$3,000 per person but now it costs \$10,000 to \$12,000 with people getting paid off every step of the way.<sup>22</sup> Beefed-up border control inadvertently fuels human smuggling and fortifies criminal gangs that increasingly control that industry. The journey is long, hard, and dangerous. If you can't pay for protection there is also risk of rape, kidnapping for ransom, or human trafficking.<sup>23</sup> If the refugees make it to another country, they can apply for asylum. According to the UN, however, despite overwhelming evidence that many asylum-seekers face extreme violence and potentially death if they are not granted asylum, deportations from Mexico, the US, and elsewhere have increased.<sup>24,25</sup> "If I don't do my job 110 percent," says Katie Shepherd, an attorney with the CARA pro bono detention project in Dilley, Texas, "someone could get deported and killed as a result."<sup>26</sup>

I fear that somewhere along the way we stopped seeing the faces of our neighbors. At some point we stopped caring about their stories. Maybe because our own stories are hard enough. Maybe overexposure to world disasters has desensitized us or we have a kind of compassion fatigue. Somehow we came to believe “undocumented” or illegal was a complete and permanent identify and stopped seeing refugees as people.

“Where does illegal start?” asks UCC pastor Debbie Lee, who leads delegations of religious leaders to Central America to better understand the root causes of migration as part of her work with the Interfaith Movement for Human Integrity. “How far back to we want to go? What about illegal taking of land?” She asks. “What about displacement caused by mining companies polluting the land?”<sup>27</sup> Or the private security goons who forced people to leave, or to the multinational garment companies that are exempt from paying minimum wage, or to our own government’s military and economic practices that have contributed to poverty in the region? We are here, migrants often say, because *you were there*. That could be said of many of the places we’ve visited during this series. *We are* connected, whether we know it or want to acknowledge it or not.

As people of faith, how do we engage with these crises? How do we respond? Well, I would suggest we start, as we have done, by seeking out personal stories—and listening. A social worker friend of mine told me recently that being heard was so much like being loved that it is difficult to tell the difference. Anyone who has been truly heard or truly seen knows this to be true.

We can continue to pray and commit to learning more and to be open to opportunities that present themselves for service. Seek out root causes. At the core, however, our annual conference bishop Minerva Carcaño would have us remember our scriptures. At a recent conference workshop on immigration, she said, “We Christians have forgotten that our scriptures are our guide for living, our map to the journey ahead. They remind us that that which we do for others is part of our salvation. Welcoming the stranger is an expression of our faith.”<sup>28</sup> Remembering we were once aliens in the land of Egypt is key. To remember our scriptures is to *remember* the human family, to reconnect it.<sup>29</sup>

We stand on the precipice of Holy Week today already knowing what is going to happen to Jesus. It has been said that the lines that will be whipped on his back represent the lines drawn in the desert by Western colonial powers, dividing up lands for themselves with no thought to the people living there. Or that the lines that will be whipped on his back represent the lines that divide us from each other.<sup>30</sup> What will our part be in the days ahead? Will we assume some of the suffering of Jesus? We will love those whom Jesus loved?

Maybe we have been asking the wrong questions. Maybe instead of asking migrants why are you here and why don’t you go home or what failure of yours brought you

to this refugee camp or this border, maybe we should be asking Are you hungry? Do you need a place to stay?<sup>31,32</sup>

The Arabs used to say,  
When a stranger appears at your door,  
feed him for three days  
before asking who he is,  
where he's come from,  
where he's headed.  
That way, he'll have strength  
enough to answer.  
Or, by then you'll be  
such good friends  
you don't care.<sup>33</sup>

"Now It Is Evening," #2187 in *The Faith We Sing*.

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<sup>1</sup> Eleanor Dearman and Travis Putnam Hill, "Illegal Central American Immigration Surges Again at U.S. Border," *Texas Tribune*, September 5, 2016, <https://www.texastribune.org/2016/09/15/central-american-illegal-immigration-us-border-look/>

<sup>2</sup> Jan Albert-Hootsen, "Central American Migrants Say Trump's Border Wall 'Can't Stop Us from Coming,'" *America: The Jesuit Review*, February 8, 2017, <http://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2017/02/08/central-american-migrants-say-trumps-border-wall-cant-stop-us-coming>

<sup>3</sup> Seth Stodder, "Trump's Border Wall Attacks the Wrong Immigration Crisis," *Politico*, January 25, 2017, <http://www.politico.com/agenda/story/2017/01/trumps-border-wall-attacks-the-wrong-immigration-crisis-000286>

<sup>4</sup> Ana Gonzalez-Barrera, "Apprehensions of Mexican Migrants at U.S. Borders Reach Near-Historic Low," Pew Research Center, April 14, 2016, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/04/14/mexico-us-border-apprehensions/>

<sup>5</sup> International Crisis Group, "Easy Prey: Criminal Violence and Central American Migration," July 28, 2016, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/central-america/easy-prey-criminal-violence-and-central-american-migration>

<sup>6</sup> FBI, Crime in the United States, 2015, overview section, <https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/2015/crime-in-the-u.s.-2015/offenses-known-to-law-enforcement/murder>

<sup>7</sup> Amnesty International, “Home Sweet Home? Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador’s Role in a Deepening Refugee Crisis,” October 14, 2016, pages 11, 21, 22, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/amr01/4865/2016/en/>

<sup>8</sup> Danielle Renwick, “Central America’s Violent Northern Triangle,” Council on Foreign Affairs, January 19, 2016, <http://www.cfr.org/transnational-crime/central-americas-violent-northern-triangle/p37286>

<sup>9</sup> Roque Planas, “How El Salvador Became the World’s Most Violent Peacetime Country,” *Huffpost*, March 4, 2016, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/el-salvador-most-violent-country\\_us\\_56d9e239e4b0000de4047fbe](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/el-salvador-most-violent-country_us_56d9e239e4b0000de4047fbe)

<sup>10</sup> Lisa Haugaard, Latin American Working Group, “A Refugee Crisis: Why Children, Men and Women Are Fleeing the Northern Triangle of Central America,” March 29, 2016, <http://www.lawg.org/our-publications/81-being-better-neighbors-towards-latin-america/1625-a-refugee-crisis-why-children-men-and-women-are-fleeing-the-northern-triangle-of-central-america>

<sup>11</sup> Kirk Semple, “Fleeing Gangs, Central American Families Surge Toward U.S.,” *New York Times*, November 12, 2016, [https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/13/world/americas/fleeing-gangs-central-american-families-surge-toward-us.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/13/world/americas/fleeing-gangs-central-american-families-surge-toward-us.html?_r=0)

<sup>12</sup> Amnesty International, “Home Sweet Home? Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador’s Role in a Deepening Refugee Crisis,” October 14, 2016, page 21, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/amr01/4865/2016/en/>

<sup>13</sup> International Crisis Group, “Easy Prey: Criminal Violence and Central American Migration,” July 28, 2016, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/central-america/easy-prey-criminal-violence-and-central-american-migration>

<sup>14</sup> Nina Lakhani, “Central America’s Rampant Violence Fuels an Invisible Refugee Crisis,” embedded video, *The Guardian*, October 13, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/13/central-america-violence-refugee-crisis-gangs-murder#img-2>

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Adriana Beltrán, “Children and Families Fleeing Violence in Central America,” WOLA: Advocacy for Human Rights in the Americas, February 21, 2017,

<https://www.wola.org/analysis/people-leaving-central-americas-northern-triangle/>

<sup>17</sup> Lisa Haugaard, Latin American Working Group, "A Refugee Crisis: Why Children, Men and Women Are Fleeing the Northern Triangle of Central America," March 29, 2016, <http://www.lawg.org/our-publications/81-being-better-neighbors-towards-latin-america/1625-a-refugee-crisis-why-children-men-and-women-are-fleeing-the-northern-triangle-of-central-america>

<sup>18</sup> Sermon by UCC Rev. Debbie Lee, Interfaith Movement for Human Integrity, delivered at Buena Vista UMC, Alameda, CA, January 15, 2017

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Nina Lakhani, "Honduras Elites Blamed for Violence Against Environmental Activists," *The Guardian*, January 31, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jan/31/honduras-environmental-activists-global-witness-violence-berta-caceres>

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Sermon by UCC Rev. Debbie Lee, Interfaith Movement for Human Integrity, delivered at Buena Vista UMC, Alameda, CA, January 15, 2017

<sup>23</sup> International Crisis Group, "Easy Prey: Criminal Violence and Central American Migration," July 28, 2016, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/central-america/easy-prey-criminal-violence-and-central-american-migration>

<sup>24</sup> Amnesty International, "Central America Turns Its Back on Hundreds of Thousands Fleeing War-Like Violence," October 14, 2016, <https://www.amnesty.ie/central-america-turns-back-hundreds-thousands-fleeing-war-like-violence/>

<sup>25</sup> Amnesty International, "Home Sweet Home? Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador's Role in a Deepening Refugee Crisis," October 14, 2016, pages 37–38, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/amr01/4865/2016/en/>

<sup>26</sup> Nina Lakhani, "Central America's Rampant Violence Fuels an Invisible Refugee Crisis," embedded video, *The Guardian*, October 13, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/13/central-america-violence-refugee-crisis-gangs-murder#img-2>. Katie Shepherd is no longer with CARA. She is now a legal fellow at the American Immigration Council.

<sup>27</sup> Personal notes from Rev. Debbie Lee's presentation at "Immigration in Such a Time as This: Trumping the System Event," sponsored by the Immigration Task Force of the California-Nevada Annual Conference, Berkeley, CA, February 20, 2017

<sup>28</sup> Personal notes from Bishop Minerva Carcaño's keynote address at "Immigration in Such a Time as This: Trumping the System Event," sponsored by the Immigration Task Force of the California-Nevada Annual Conference, Berkeley, CA, February 20, 2017

<sup>29</sup> Personal notes from Dr. David Vasquez-Levy's remarks at "Borders & Identity," 2017 Earl Lectures, Pacific School of Religion, Berkeley, CA, March 17-18, 2017

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Personal notes from Rev. Debbie Lee's presentation at "Immigration in Such a Time as This: Trumping the System Event," sponsored by the Immigration Task Force of the California-Nevada Annual Conference, Berkeley, CA, February 20, 2017

<sup>32</sup> According to a January 17, 2017, article in *Voice of America*, the number of sanctuary churches in the US has doubled from 400 before Donald Trump's election as president to 800 since then. Of that number, 60 are United Methodist churches. <http://www.voanews.com/a/more-us-churches-sanctuaries-at-risk-immigrants/3680284.html>

<sup>33</sup> Excerpt from "Red Brocade," 1952, by Arab American poet Naomi Shihab Nye, <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/red-brocade>