Migrant Journey from Central America: 
A Guide to Setting Up An Interactive Learning Experience

WHAT IS THE MIGRANT JOURNEY?

The migrant journey is an interactive experience to learn about the factors driving people to flee their homes in the Northern Triangle (El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras) and seek refuge in the United States. As people go through the journey, they learn why children and families are fleeing from their homes and the obstacles they face finding protection in other countries, including the United States.

The migrant journey is an experience that congregations (or any other group) can use to learn more about the perilous journey that children and families are making every day.

WHAT YOU NEED TO SET UP A MIGRANT JOURNEY EXPERIENCE:

Materials and space:

- The printed descriptions of the characters for each section.
- Space with room for four stations. An example is shown on the next page. The migrant journey is most effective when participants can walk from one location to another.
- If possible, use pictures at each station. You will need pictures representing:
  - Central American countries
  - Mexico
  - the U.S.-Mexico border
  - a U.S. community

Staff:

- One guide to take people through the migrant journey per every 15 people. Ideally, this person has a basic knowledge of the challenges in migrating from Central America to the United States.
  - We recommend setting up groups of 15 people to go through the migrant journey together and determine the number of guides accordingly. Participants can learn more at ELCA AMMPARO or ELCA Advocacy.
BEFORE STARTING THE MIGRANT JOURNEY:

1. Set up four stations, each representing a place that migrants encounter in their journey. Be creative!

2. Prepare the guides for the important role they play! They should read the script below to familiarize themselves with the journey. Through the migrant journey, guides will:
   - facilitate conversation;
   - describe each setting; and
   - make sure each person knows their role and when to speak.

SUGGESTED SCRIPT FOR GUIDES

The following is a general script that guides can use as they are guiding people through the migrant journey. Groups will begin the journey in Central America, move to Mexico, then to the U.S.-Mexico border and finish the journey in a U.S. community. Guides will take people through the journey, explain what is happening and ask questions to ensure this is an interactive experience.

Station 1: Central America

In this station you will:
- introduce yourself and your role in the journey;
- introduce people to the dynamics;
- hand out roles; and
- explain the reasons why children and families are forced to flee their communities in Central America.

Sample script for guides

Welcome to the migrant journey and AMMPARO! Here we are in Central America! By the end of this journey, you will learn about the reasons families from Central America are forced to flee their communities. You will also learn about the AMMPARO Strategy, a commitment by our church to accompany children and families. How many of you have heard about AMMPARO? (Wait for people to raise their hands.)
Starting in 2011, an increased number of unaccompanied children and families began to leave El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, known as the Northern Triangle countries in Central America, and make the perilous journey through Mexico. In 2014, there were approximately 70,000 unaccompanied children and another 70,000 people in families who arrived in the United States from these three countries. The numbers have continued to be high. There was a slight decrease in 2015, partly because Mexico sped up its detention and deportation of migrants at the urging of the U.S. government. Eight of you will be playing the roles of people through the migrant journey. These stories are not of actual people but rather compilations of stories that we hear over and over again at the ELCA.

(Hand out roles, see page 11.)

Let’s now imagine that we are in El Salvador, one of the most violent countries in the hemisphere. What would make you leave your home and your country? (Wait for answer.) Let’s meet a couple of people. First, we will hear from a Central American mother. (Bring the Central American mother to the front, so people can hear the person.)

Violence, impunity and corruption, lack of opportunities and environmental degradation are driving people from three countries out of their communities to seek protection either in Mexico or in the United States. Let’s hear what our Central American youth has to say. (Bring Central American youth to the front).

REMEMBER: These are REAL situations that REAL people go through every day.

Helpful facts to know during this section

- According to the U.S. State Department, the United Nations, and many other sources, violence plays a huge role in why people are migrating. At the ELCA, we have heard, seen and accompanied people in the stories like the ones you are about to hear.
- Beyond violence, people also leave due to lack of opportunities, poverty and environmental degradation.
- Police and other authority figures often are the perpetrators of violence or they work with other violent groups, like gangs, so reporting crimes can be dangerous.
- Approximately 95 percent of murders in these three countries are never solved.
- Families often get loans or borrow against their house to pay for a guide called a coyote.

Suggested questions to ask in this section (Feel free to add more!)

- To the group:
  - What would make you leave your home and community?
- To the Central American mother and young person:
  - Do you want to leave your community?
  - What would you miss the most if you leave?
  - How are you feeling now?
Roles in this section

Central American mother

Some years ago, your husband left you, and since then, you have been the sole support of your three children through a small store you run from the front of your home in a large city. The store has provided a good source of income for your family including your aging parents, who live with you. Your neighborhood borders another neighborhood that is controlled by the MS-13 gang, and its members frequently are seen in your neighborhood. In fact, since your oldest son is now a teen, these gang members have made several attempts to get him and his friends to join the gang. So far, he has resisted, but one of his friends recently decided to join the gang. About six months ago, the gang began to collect quotas from all the businesses in the neighborhood, including yours. This biweekly payment has steadily increased, and now it leaves you with barely enough money to cover your store expenses and feed your family. There is no longer money left over for anything else. You have a brother in the United States who wants you to come there and will help you start a new life. You don't see an alternative and are talking to friends about how to do this. Quota – payments required by a gang to ensure safety.

Central American youth 1

I am a 14-year-old girl and have lived in the same community since birth. My neighborhood has always been part of gang territory, which means there are many limits on entering and leaving. But I live down the street from my school and felt safe. Recently I have caught the attention of one of the gang leaders, and he wants me to be his girlfriend. I don't want anything to do with him but have been told by other girls that saying no isn't an option. They have told me stories of girls who were raped and even killed if they refused. My family wants me to go north to live with my uncle in L.A. and is talking to coyotes about how much it will cost to get me there. Coyote – someone who transports migrants into another country.

Central American youth 2

I am a 13-year-old young man and I live with my mom. My neighborhood borders a neighborhood that is controlled by the MS-13 gang, and its members are often in my neighborhood. In fact, they have made several attempts to get me and my friends to join the gang. So far, I have resisted, but one of my friends recently decided to join, and I've been told that I can't say no if I want to live to see another day.

Seeking police protection isn't an option. Our friends have told us stories of how people who have gone to the police to report a crime are visited the next day by gang members who know the police were contacted. MS-13 – Prominent gang in El Salvador.

Suggested script to transition to the next station

To the mother and the youths:

- Are you going to make the journey?
- What are your options?

(Most people will choose to make the journey. If someone chooses not to, they will likely have to spend all their time in their house because there are lookouts all over the neighborhood. They will also be putting their family at risk.)

People pay thousands of dollars to have someone guide them on the journey from Central America to the United States. Families often get loans or borrow against their house to pay for a coyote. The more money you pay, the more comfortable you might be, but the journey isn't safe for anyone.

So, let's take the journey.
Station 2: Mexico

**In this station you will:**
- introduce people to the dangers people face as they travel through Mexico to the United States;
- talk about the asylum and protection system in Mexico; and
- introduce people to a Mexican police officer and a shelter worker in southern Mexico.

**Sample script for guides**
Now you’ve walked and ridden across rivers, deserts and mountains, and you’ve found a shelter where you can shower and sleep. You saw some of the most serious human rights violations and violence inflicted on migrants. But you made it to the southern border of Mexico and you found a shelter. I bet you are pretty happy to see our shelter director.

**Helpful facts to know for this section**
- In addition to the dangers of hopping on a train or walking long distances, migrants say they encounter kidnappings, killings, theft and many forms of violence as they journey through Mexico.
- Sexual and gender-based violence is a common way that women are attacked. Rape is so common that doctors in Central America report that a lot of women get birth control before they make the journey.
- Mexico has increased enforcement on their southern border with the support of the U.S. government under the Obama administration.
- Many of the shelters that provide services to migrants alongside the route are faith-based and have been providing food and shelter to migrants for many years.
- Migrant shelters have had to adapt in the last few years because so many people are requesting asylum (refugee status) in Mexico and do not intend to continue to the United States. In fact, according to the United Nations, asylum applications in Mexico have gone up by over 1,000 percent since 2013. Most of these applications are from Central Americans.

**Suggested questions to ask in this section (Feel free to add!)**
- To the group:
  - If you were the child or mother, would you trust the people you encounter in this journey?
  - What would you be afraid of?
- To the shelter director and police officer:
  How do you feel about these children and families? Do you think you see them positively or negatively and why?
- To the youth and families:
  - Do you think you will be happy to see the (shelter director/police officer)?
- To the Central American mother and young person:
  - Are you going to tell the police officer your story?
Roles in this Section

Faith-based shelter director
You are the director for an organization that provides services for migrants in Tapachula, Mexico. While the organization has been a migrant shelter since the 1990s, it had to begin providing legal representation and housing outside of the shelter a few years ago when more people began seeking asylum in Mexico. While you used to do a lot more office work, the shelter is so swamped that you now assist in cases and provide psychological support. The work has taken an emotional toll on you because you don't always find out what happens to the people when they leave the shelter, but you are committed to your work because your faith calls you to it. You began working with migrants as a volunteer through your congregation 25 years ago.

Police officer
You work for the police department of a town on the Mexico-Guatemala border. You aren't sure how to feel about the increase of families and children traveling alone from Central America in the past few years. While seeing children traveling alone hanging out in the city center breaks your heart, you have also seen an increase in crime on the highway that passes through town. While migrants are sometimes the victims of the crimes, they are also sometimes the perpetrators, and you feel they have made the town more unsafe. The pay you receive as a police officer is not enough to feed your family of four so you sometimes ask migrants to give you money to let them continue their journey. You feel that you are giving them a break while also making some extra money to feed your family.

Suggested script to transition to the next station
Temporary shelters generally have a two-day maximum for people to stay, and you are on the southern border of Mexico so you have a long road ahead of you.

You have used your money to pay for a coyote and possibly a boat to cross the river. Now you have had to give up your most valuable item. You still need to get through almost all of Mexico with no money and your best bartering tool taken from you. You hope another police officer doesn't stop you before you reach the U.S. border.
Station 3: U.S.-Mexico border

In this station you will:

• teach people the process of applying for asylum in the United States;
• talk about the process for children and families who arrive at the U.S. border; and
• dispel myths about border security.

Sample script for guides

We are now at the U.S.-Mexico border. In your journey you have likely seen or experienced different types of violence and discrimination. There are many people who you left behind. While in years past many Central Americans tried to avoid law enforcement, today children and families have generally tried to turn themselves in to authorities to begin a legal process. It is important to highlight that it is LEGAL under U.S. and international law for the people we have followed to enter the United States and ask for asylum (or refugee status). Asylum laws were formalized after World War II. Why do you think asylum laws were created then?

You are going to meet a couple of people. First, our Border Patrol officer:

(Have the person read their role.) (Ask questions of both the officer and the people who arrived.)

The process for unaccompanied children, adults or families is a little different. Because the United States has a law that says that the U.S. government will ensure that children in its custody are not the victims of trafficking or other types of abuse, children from Central America (this law does not apply to Mexican or Canadian children) are evaluated with a specialist and likely end up in a U.S. community awaiting their legal case to go to court. Families can either be put in detention (mother and child in a jail-like setting) or released with an alternative to detention, such as an ankle monitor. Public opinion often considers the trafficking laws for children and asylum laws as a loopholes, but they are, in fact, staples of our immigration system.

Helpful facts for this section

• The number of immigrants at the border is at an all-time low today.
• According to the federal Drug Enforcement Administration, most drugs come into the United States through legal ports of entry. They are not smuggled through other areas at the border, as is the common misconception.
• There are approximately 700 miles of fence on the border. Areas that do not have a fence are either private property, a river or a wildlife preserve.
• Since it was created in 2003, the budget and the number of agents for border protection has more than doubled.
• The 2008 Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act outlines guidelines for handling children who arrive in the United States alone to ensure they are not trafficking victims. Some members of Congress want to amend this law.
• The Flores Agreement is a court settlement that set standards for the treatment of children in immigration custody, including banning the long-term detention of children. Some members of Congress want to end the Flores Agreement.
Suggested questions to ask in this section (Feel free to add!)

- To the group:
  - After seeing what it takes to get to the U.S. border, do you think it is an easy journey?

- To Border Patrol officer:
  - How do you feel about the number of children and families arriving at the border?
  - Do you think you can tell if they left their homes out of fear and should qualify for asylum?

- To shelter worker:
  - How are you feeling?
  - What are your biggest challenges?

- To Central American children and mother:
  - Will you tell your story to this Border Patrol officer?
  - How do you feel now that you have arrived?
  - Do you trust the shelter worker or the Border Patrol officer?

Roles in this Section

Border Patrol officer

You are a first-generation U.S. citizen from Mexico. Your parents came to Arizona long before you and your brothers were born. You have always wanted to be a police officer but were frustrated with the hiring practices in your city, and someone suggested that you'd be a great Border Patrol officer. Your skill in Spanish helped you get the job, and you are proud to have been an officer for two years. Last year, the job was even more stressful as many children and families were apprehended and processed. While you feel sorry for the children, you don't think their parents should be bringing them. You think people should come via legal means.

Shelter worker

You work with a religious group that has a hospitality house near the U.S.-Mexico border. You give people food, water, clothing, basic first aid and a place to rest. You do not ask people's legal status. People find out about your group through word of mouth. You try to maintain good relations with the Border Patrol and local authorities.

Suggested script to transition to the next station

As I mentioned, many children and families might eventually end up in U.S. communities while they await to make their case to an immigration judge.

Let's move on to the final station.
Station 4: A U.S. community

*In this station you will:*  
• talk about the problems facing migrant children and families in their communities;  
• wrap up and reflect on the journey; and  
• urge people to take action and reach out to their members of Congress.

*Sample script for guides*

Many migrant children and families live in communities throughout the United States while awaiting their immigration hearing. Although we might encounter unaccompanied children and families in our schools or communities, they are likely still awaiting an immigration decision and might still be deported. We will meet a couple of people who you might encounter in your own community.

(Have teacher read their role.) (Have member of Congress read their role.)

There are numerous bills in Congress that attempt to repeal trafficking laws for children and make life harder for children and families like the ones we have accompanied in this journey. The ELCA passed the AMMPARO Strategy for its members to advocate, accompany and create awareness about what we learned today. We are all included in work that addresses the root causes in Central America, upholds the basic rights and safety of migrant children and families and works toward just and humane policies affecting migrants in and outside of the United States.

*Helpful facts for this section*

• Being granted asylum is difficult. Individuals must prove they were targeted, have reasonable fear of future persecution and that their country could not protect them. They must also prove they were targeted because of their race, religion, national origin, political opinion or membership in a social group.

• As of April 2017, individuals have to wait approximately two years before appearing before an immigration judge.

• While there are backlogs in the immigration system, quickly processing people without enough time to gather evidence for their cases is also dangerous.

*Suggested questions to ask in this section (Feel free to add!)*

• To the group:  
  ○ What do you want to say to your member of Congress?

• To the school teacher:  
  ○ How do you feel about these children in your classroom?  
  ○ What are some of the barriers?

• To the member of Congress:  
  ○ What are some easy solutions to the issues you are facing?

• To the Central American children and mother:  
  ○ What do you need from the community around you?  
  ○ How do you feel now?
Roles in this Section

School teacher
You are a teacher at a school in the United States that has seen the number of English as a second language students double in the last few years. While you don't completely know why, you know that most of them have had to miss school to go to immigration court. As a teacher, you are unsure how to effectively teach these students since you don't know how to keep them engaged in the classroom. In addition, their parents miss parent-teacher conferences, and you suspect that's because they don't know when they occur.

Member of Congress
Last year, you voted for a bill to expand the detention of families from Central America. It seemed like the right thing to do at the time to pacify many of your anti-immigrant constituents before the election. While you think that it is heartbreaking to see families traveling together, you think that resources are better spent to help U.S. families. You know many of the families are seeking asylum, but you wonder if these families are just saying that so they can stay in the country. You know that asking for asylum when you arrive in the United States is legal, but you can't imagine things are bad enough in Central America to merit receiving asylum. You even vacationed in Guatemala a few years ago! You hear from faith-based groups that we have the responsibility to protect vulnerable children and families and, while your own faith-community has led you to be sympathetic to the migrants' stories, you don't think that your constituents would support immigration reform.

Sample script for wrap-up

Wrap-up
What was the most surprising thing for you? What would you like to know more about?

Through the Bridging Youth to Youth program, you can go back to your congregation and youth group and learn more. Get involved by becoming a welcoming congregation and joining in advocacy. Learn more about the strategy in the AMMPARO video and the other videos.
Roles

Central American mother
Some years ago, my husband left me. Since then I have been the sole support of my three children through a small store that I run from the front of my home in a large city. The store has provided a good source of income for my family, including my aging parents who live with me as well. My neighborhood borders another one that is controlled by MS-13, and gang members frequently are seen in my community. In fact, when my son became a teenager, gang members made several attempts to convince him and his friends to join them. So far, he has resisted, but one of his friends recently decided to join them. About six months ago, the gang began to collect quotas from all the neighborhood businesses, including mine. This biweekly payment has steadily increased and, at this point, it leaves me with barely enough money to cover my store expenses and feed my family. My brother in the U.S. will help me start a new life there. I don’t see an alternative and am talking to friends about how to do this.

Central American youth 1
I am a 14-year-old girl who has lived in the same community since birth. While my neighborhood has always been part of gang territory, which means there are many controls about entering and leaving, I live down the street from my school and had felt safe in daily life. Recently, however, I have caught the attention of a gang leader who wants me to be his girlfriend. I don't want anything to do with him, but I have been told by other girls in my community that saying no isn't an option. They have told me stories of girls who were raped and even killed if they refused. My family wants me to go live with my uncle in Los Angeles and is talking to coyotes about how much it will cost to get me there.

Central American youth 2
I am a 13-year-old boy who lives with my mom. My neighborhood borders another one that is controlled by MS-13, and gang members frequently are seen in my community. In fact, these gang members have made several attempts to convince me and my friends to join them. So far, I have resisted, but a friend recently decided to join them. I've been told that I can't say no if I want to live to see another day.

Faith-based shelter director
I am the director for an organization that provides services for migrants in Tapachula, Mexico. While the organization has functioned as a migrant shelter since the 1990s, it had to begin providing legal representation and housing outside of the shelter a few years ago when more and more people began seeking asylum in Mexico. While I used to do a lot more office work, the shelter is so swamped that I now assist in cases and provide psychological support. The work has taken an emotional toll on me since I don't always find out what happened to people who pass through the shelter. But I'm committed to my work because of my faith. I began working with migrants as a volunteer through my church 25 years ago.

Police officer
I work for the local police in a town near the Mexico-Guatemala border. I'm not quite sure how to feel about the increase of families and children traveling alone from Central America in the past few years. While seeing children traveling alone and hanging out in the city center breaks my heart, I've also seen an increase in crime along the highway that passes through town. While migrants are sometimes the victims of these crimes, at times they are the perpetrators; I feel they have made the town more unsafe. The pay I receive as a police officer is not enough to feed my family of four, so I sometimes ask migrants.
Border Patrol officer
I'm a first-generation American citizen. My parents came to Arizona from Mexico way before I was born, and all of my brothers were born here. I've always wanted to be a police officer but was frustrated with the local hiring practices in my city. Someone suggested that I would be a great border patrol agent. My skill in Spanish helped me get the job, and I've been an agent for two years now. Last year the job was even more stressful as many children and families were apprehended and processed. While I feel really sorry for the children, I don't think their parents should be bringing them here. People should come via legal means.

Shelter worker
I work with a religious group that has a hospitality house near the U.S.-Mexico border. I give people food, water, clothing, basic first aid and a place to rest. I do not ask if they are legal. People find out about my group through word of mouth. I try to maintain good relations with the border control and local authorities.

School teacher
I am a school teacher in the U.S. who has seen the number of English-language learners (ELL) double in the last couple of years. I'm not completely clear why, but I know that most of the students have had to miss school to go to immigration court. As a teacher, I'm not sure how to teach these students since I don't know how to keep them engaged in the classroom. In addition, their parents miss parent-teacher conferences because I suspect they don't know when they happen.

Member of Congress
Last year I voted for a bill to expand the detention of families from Central America. It seemed like the right thing to do at the time to pacify many of my anti-immigrant constituents before the election. While it is heartbreaking to see entire families traveling together, I think resources are better spent to help U.S.-born families. I know many of the families are seeking asylum, but I'm not sure if they are just saying that so they can stay in the country. Asking for asylum in the U.S. is completely legal, but I can't imagine things are so bad in Central America to merit receiving asylum. I even vacationed in Guatemala a few years ago! I hear from faith-based groups that we have the responsibility to protect vulnerable children and families and, while my faith community has left me open to different stories, I don't think my voters will accept any change in position.