

Unaccompanied Minors: The New Immigration Wave from Central America

Introduction

In mid-2014, the news media caught up with the new wave of immigration across the US border with Mexico around mid-2014. For several months this was a topic that would constantly be raised up by the media and then it stopped. This new wave of migrants was different from others since unaccompanied minors were crossing the border in very large numbers. Mothers with infant and toddlers were also part of this wave. This also was a time when anti-immigrant opinion kept escalating in the U.S.

Immigration has always been in the radar of both CSM and GM because it is a human right and because it also impacts the ministries we serve both in the United States as well as overseas. This massive new wave is comprised mostly of children and women. The vulnerability of this population creates an imperative for both CSM and GM to join efforts to address the issue.

Root Causes of the New Immigration Wave

The root causes of this new and massive wave are quite complex. This was heard over and over again by CSM and GM during last year's visits to the US border with Mexico, as well as during the February 2015 visits to companions in Honduras and El Salvador. This means that the response to the issue cannot be only palliative, rather multiform and multifaceted. The response asked that the entire ELCA constituency join forces with other Lutheran organizations with whom the ELCA works. It also means that it will not go away after a couple of months but will be an on-going concern of both units for years to come.

ELCA's Strategic Response

The ELCA is developing a strategy for both CSM and GM to work collaboratively in addressing this issue as a disaster. This strategy is based in what was heard and seen in the trip to the US border as well as the conversations with companions in the region and a Round Table meeting organized by LIRS in which CSM, GM and ELCA companions participated. One of the most important aspects of this strategy will be the advocacy piece that is being developed by the Washington Office in collaboration with the Latin America and Caribbean desk in GM.

The ELCA strategy will include emergency response, but will also include work with companions in El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala and Mexico. As we heard from children and families deported to their countries of origin from the Guatemalan border with Mexico, some of the reasons to risk the journey to the US in spite of all the possible violent situations they will face are: violence related to gangs, drug trafficking and organized crime; family reunion; lack of opportunities (including access to education); and poverty. All these causes can relate to structural issues that have not been addressed and that go back to the 80s and 90s. Structural causes include: the World Bank's neoliberal prescriptions that weakened economies and made it impossible for farmers to continue growing basic and traditional agriculture; the Free Trade Agreements imposed on those economies which deteriorated even more the access to food security, the civil war and military regimes of the 80s; and even Hurricane Mitch in late 90s which devastated Honduras agricultural production regions.

2015 Delegation Visit to Honduras and El Salvador

The delegation that traveled to Honduras and El Salvador heard the cry of pastors and leaders for assistance in another kind of migration: the displacement of people from communities because of the violence. This is as alarming because people need to be removed from their communities as they face death threats or abduction for ransom.

The delegation also heard the testimonies of the horrors lived in the journey to the North. The different kinds of violence children and women experienced are shocking. As we bore witness to these testimonies, the delegation felt compelled to commit to work and invite the entire ELCA to respond.