

Hi all,

I invite you to read the article below written by Dr. Teresita Matos-Post one of the participants in the launch of the Central America Migration Mission Network pulling in some quotes and reflections from a variety of other participants.

For reference (and linking back to the author), the author, [Dr. Teresita Matos-Post](#), is the Executive Director of [Beth-el Farmworker Ministry in Tampa Bay, Florida](#).

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### **Christian Women Leaders of Mesoamerica: Navigating Ministry in the Migration Route**

By Dr. Teresita Matos-Post, MDiv., DMin.

During the launch of the Mesoamerican Mission and Migration Network in El Salvador last March, delegates from churches and other institutions engaged in lively discussions on migration. The voices of women working in ministries and organizations along the migratory route resounded in my ears.

As a Mujerista theologian, I was intrigued by the unique perspective these female leaders from Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Mexico added to our discussions. They offered new narratives to address migration and responses to the migratory processes of people on mobility. Together, we dissected the Christian church's challenges as it endeavors to transform the root causes that force people to migrate or prevent them from moving freely in search of a better quality of life.

After our return from El Salvador, I got to dive deeper with these leaders individually. The context of their work is in countries with a rich history and experience as places from which migratory groups leave and where relatives remain behind with many questions, countries of transit, countries of destination, such as Mexico and the United States, and countries that receive returnees or deportees.

My personal experience is that as a ministry leader in a country of destination. My work at Beth-El Farm Worker Ministry, located in central Florida, forces me to face day-to-day the struggle and injustices immigrants from these same countries face once they have arrived at what they expected to be the achievement of the American dream.

In listening to these leaders' stories and perspectives, I quickly realized how narrow my perspective was, coming from my work in the last phase of the migration route. I wanted to learn more: What does ministry with people in mobility look like in their countries of origin and transit?

What does life look like for those who are returned or deported to their countries of origin? This article seeks to share those stories and women's work in those settings.

### **Who are these network leaders in Mesoamerica?**

From Honduras

- Selenia Ordoñez is a leader of the Presbyterian Women in the Presbyterian Evangelical Mission of Honduras. She volunteers her leadership skills at Centro Villa De Gracia, which accommodates groups from the United States.
- Rev. Dori Kay Hjalmarson identifies as an immigrant born in the United States and living in Honduras. She works as a theological educator and offers accompaniment and solidarity to Christian leaders in Honduras.

From El Salvador:

- Tomasita Moran is a social worker and current director of Alfalit, a Christian education and development association where she has worked for over 30 years.
- Carmen Diaz is a church leader of the Calvinist Reformed Church of El Salvador (IRCES, acronym in Spanish). She offers psychosocial support to migrants.

From Guatemala:

- Nancy Carrera is a founding member of her local Presbyterian church for 28 years and coordinator of groups as part of the Protestant Center for Pastoral Studies in Central America (CEDEPCA, acronym in Spanish).
- Delia Catú, an indigenous woman from the Maya people in Guatemala, assists the migrant program, primarily offering accompaniment to migrant children and youth who have returned and are in the process of reintegration at Pop No'j. This association facilitates and accompanies the organization, training, promotion, and participation of the Mayan people in Guatemala.

From Mexico:

- Bridich Saragos, an indigenous Presbyterian leader from the region of Chiapas, is an auxiliary coordinator at the Migrant Resource Center in Agua Prieta, at the border of Mexico and Arizona.
- Perla de Angel is a lawyer defender of the rights of people in mobility, with over a decade of experience serving at the border of Agua Prieta, at the border of Mexico and Arizona, with CAME/Exodus Migrant Assistance Center, a ministry of the Catholic Church in Mexico and CRM/Migrant Resource Center, a ministry in partnership with the Presbyterian Church.

### **Their Theological Approaches to Migration**

During the network's launch in El Salvador, it became evident that participants had distinct understandings of migration based on their context, news sources, and proximity to migrant

populations. This also highlighted gaps between the actualities of migrant populations and our theological approaches to migration as church leaders.

The women from Mesoamerica emphasized that ministry with migrant populations is not just suggested but a mandated practice in Christianity. They cited Christian principles such as loving our neighbors, providing service, and treating the foreigner and sojourner well as values that need to be preached more often in the context of migration and put into action beyond mere words.

Carmen from El Salvador pointed to Matthew 25:35-46 as a clear indication of the Church's responsibility towards migrants. "I remember the first boy we received here, a young man of 16 years old, when I opened the door for him. He was so young, and he only had a small bag; it was all he had, and I felt such great pain. I truly believe that Jesus is in that person," recalled Carmen.

Perla, a lawyer serving in Mexico, firmly believes that migrating is a fundamental human right. At the network launch in El Salvador, Perla wore a t-shirt with images of butterflies flying and a phrase that read, "I am also a migrant." She initiated this local campaign to cultivate empathy and promote acts of solidarity to counteract the hostile rhetoric against migrant caravan members. She stated, "Every individual should be free to migrate, or not. As an advocate for the human rights of this population and as a woman of faith, I am completely convinced that every person in this world is a migrant in some way."

Perla draws inspiration from Pope Francis, who said, "It is not only about migrants but our humanity." Perla solemnly reflects on the Pope's teaching, saying, "The suffering that people on the move go through is a reflection of the deterioration of our humanity. There can't be so many people causing so much harm."

### **Migration: a topic the Church avoids**

A common thread emerged in our conversations, not unfamiliar to the Church in the United States: the Church's silence on migrations.

According to Selenia, a Christian leader in Honduras, migration is a sensitive topic within the church community. She explained, "Migrating for economic benefit is seen as good, but if someone is forced to leave due to a threat to their life, they may be judged unfairly by the church."

Rev. Dori, a coworker in Honduras, added that the shame associated with the reasons someone leaves, the feeling of betrayal for leaving their Church and family, and the perceived failure if they are returned or deported prevent migrants and their families from sharing their experiences with their church communities.

Every year on Good Friday, a vigil called Via Crucis of the Migrant is held in Ciudad, Guatemala. During the vigil, a woman shared with Nancy of CEDEPCA her experience with the potential migration of her son. Nancy noted that a public event like the vigil allows families to share migration stories, a topic the Church is silent about. Nancy adds, "We have been very indifferent to the issue as a church. We see it in the news, we know our neighbors, people from the Church [are impacted by migrations], but it is not a topic we address."

Bridich, who coordinates services for migrants at the border, pointed out that churches often lack understanding about migration. "This is because they do not work, preach, or talk about it. As a result, the Church has no idea until it becomes involved and awakened towards this community that is moving through diverse situations."

### **Countries of Origin: Why do people migrate?**

When I asked the Mesoamerican leaders about how their experience in El Salvador influenced their understanding of migration, they all gave the same response. They expressed that they found similar conditions in communities in El Salvador that forced people to migrate north from their home countries.

Delia Catú strongly explained the reasons why people migrate, echoing the sentiments of others. Delia stated that people migrate due to a lack of decent job opportunities and essential services such as access to electricity, sanitation, healthcare, and education. Poverty is widespread, not due to a lack of wealth, that is, in knowledge or culture among families, but rather due to corruption and mismanagement by leaders. The unequal distribution of resources and discrimination against indigenous populations exacerbates the problem. Neglect, climate change, and droughts have rendered the land infertile and depleted, making it impossible to produce food.

Bridich mentioned that another common reason they hear from migrants at the border in Agua Prieta is that criminal groups have displaced them. According to Bridich migrants at the border report, "they are taking away their land, recruiting them, threatening them, or have killed members of their family and they fear for their lives and run away from their place of origin and come north seeking asylum."

Given the circumstances and the treacherous nature of the journey through the migration route, Selenia from Honduras reflected on the families and many moms with children who come through Honduras in the caravans originating from South America. She wondered, "How do you make this difficult decision to travel with your family and expose them?" All the women in our calls agreed it must be a desperate situation with no other viable options.

Perla affirmed that notion, "The most important and common trait among any profile we have attended to has been the search for a dignified life free of violence. No one moves if they don't have that great need."

Tomasita is involved in a project that constructs homes for families in El Salvador. Both Carmen and Tomasita stated that in El Salvador if families have a small house and a source of income, they will not need to migrate. Tomasita shared the story of one of the recipients of the homes they helped build: "She had a young son and was living with close relatives who eventually became angry and told them they had to leave. She participated in our program, and now she has her own little house and works in agriculture, cutting lorocos. She says, 'I have a little house, and I have a job; I don't need to migrate.'"

### **Countries of Transit: A Path of Death**

For several decades, communities in Mesoamerican countries have been experiencing the departure of young people and men. However, for countries like Honduras, migratory groups passing through their territory are a recent phenomenon.

Selenia recalls that just over a year ago, many migrants started coming to Honduras, which initially made them feel scared because they did not know who these people were. Selenia said, "We felt that the government at that time was not doing anything. For example, the Danlí border in Trojes, an impoverished community, they were overcrowded with 3,000 migrants entering daily. There were needs in all aspects and insufficient supplies; there was no food, no water, and no place to bathe. Watching the news, one feels overwhelmed."

Migrants in transit face numerous dangers beyond the lack of basic needs. "Men are at risk of robbery, kidnapping, and human trafficking, while women face an even greater threat, including the risk of being raped, robbed, scammed, prostituted, and subjected to involuntary servitude. Young women and adolescents who are well-informed often seek medical assistance for contraceptive medication before embarking on their journey to prevent pregnancy in situations of sexual violence," shared Delia, who teaches human reproduction and sexuality to returned and deported children and adolescents to prevent sexual abuse.

At the network launch in El Salvador, Bridich helped lead a moving devotional based on a weekly vigil their ministry holds at the border. Bridich reminds us, 'Not everyone reaches their destination; many perish on the way.' The vigil serves to honor the lives lost on the migration journey. Participants lift white crosses adorned with names, a solemn recognition of those who have passed. Some crosses bear the poignant label 'unknown,' representing the countless unidentified bodies or souls lost without a trace. Bridich emphasizes, "We commemorate their memory, acknowledging their humanity as children of God—mothers, fathers, grandparents—who, tragically, fell short of their dreams. In our prayers, we seek solace for their families and the void left in their wake."

### **What can the Church do in countries of destiny?**

So, what is a church to do in their communities for those who make it to their destination, often Mexico or the United States?

A US Presbytery hired CEDEPCA to raise awareness about the challenges Guatemalan migrants face in their communities. The Presbytery aimed to address the increasing number of Guatemalans working in agriculture, high truancy rates, and young pregnant girls.

Nancy explains that it was important for the Presbytery in the USA to understand the reasons behind specific actions. She states, "Migrant men would take their older children to work, but they would then encounter the law in the United States, which mandates that education is a right. This meant they were obligated to send their children to school, where the instruction was always in English. Due to overcrowding in living spaces, young girls ended up getting pregnant. Most of these families speak more than 22 recognized Mayan languages and struggle to understand the systems in the United States."

The Presbytery established a support group for young mothers, providing parenting classes and workshops on U.S. laws and rights, teaching them Spanish and English, and providing sexual and reproductive education. As a result, the mothers learned about their new environment and received additional training to start their businesses and support their families.

Selenia believes that churches in the United States could have a greater impact if they advocate for migrant communities due to the availability of resources. "It is important to insist on the human rights of those who have already arrived in the United States, as there have been many

rights violations. Churches could influence the recognition of these rights and defend the rights of migrants," Selenia added.

Bridich in Mexico stated, "As a church, it is not our concern to ask why you are crossing or coming, but we must unite in solidarity with these people by offering what we have. Because the Lord does not ask us for something that we do not have, but that we have, we should share."

### **In Ministry with the Returned or Deported**

Before this experience in El Salvador and the many conversations with the delegates from the USA and Mesoamerica, I had not given too much thought to the fortunes of those who are caught in transition and returned to their country of origin and those who make it to the country of their aimed destiny and are deported.

In our conversations, these Christian Leaders from Mesoamerica have an immense knowledge of what awaits the returned and deported in their home countries.

Tomasita pointed out the significant number of people who have been returned or deported to their communities in El Salvador. Even though there are no official records of the exact number, when Tomasita interacts with groups in the communities Alfalit serves, she shares that there are often a handful of self-identified deportees. She states, "There are many testimonies in the communities, and when someone starts talking and sharing their experience, it's not just 2 or 3 people, but 7, 8, or even more."

According to several leaders, helping returned and deported migrants reintegrate into their communities is a challenging task. Carmen of IRCES, who has worked with returnees and deportees in various capacities in El Salvador, explains that many returnees face social stigma. "While sending remittances, they develop self-esteem for having money and being able to help their families, but when they return, they are assumed to be a failure; if they returned with nothing, people in their communities surmise it must be because they did something wrong. They do not have where to return, nor do they have contacts. If they migrated due to violence and their lives are at risk, they cannot return to their communities of origin," Carmen concluded.

### **The Work and Challenges Ahead**

As all of us leaders return to our homes and work, we share a common expectation for the possibilities that the long-awaited formation of the Mission and Migration Network will bring to the work of the Church with communities in mobility.

The women I interviewed mentioned the challenges in understanding migration dynamics as a significant obstacle. However, they expressed hope for the connections made and identified goals and tasks for the leaders within the network and the Church abroad.

Perla stated, "In the field of immigration, there are no fixed rules. What may be applicable today may not be applicable tomorrow. Hence, it is important to keep abreast of the latest developments and changing dynamics in the local context." Similarly, Delia added, "The topic of migration changes constantly. Today, they say one thing, tomorrow, something else. We can never understand it fully in depth." For Nancy in Guatemala, the network has the potential to "create bridges between churches and Guatemala [and MesoAmerica] and between churches and immigrant communities in the United States." Finally, Delia, pointed to the extraordinary

leverage of the Church, “pastors, priests, and nuns are closer to the community and the stories of the people. And they are the ones who have the powers of voice and vote and influence in political circles.”