

Child Migration Perspectives

By Kristi Van Nostran, Mission Co-worker in El Salvador

“*Buenas noches*,” said the voice on the other end of the phone. It took me a minute to recognize the polite and timid tone. It was Jose*, a young man whose family I have become close to at church. “Sorry to bother you this late,” he continued, “but I wanted to talk to you about something important – I’m considering going north.”

My heart sank.

“You know what it’s like in my neighborhood,” he said. “*Gracias a Dios* I don’t have problems with anyone right now, but they know I don’t have work and it’s just a matter of time before they start asking me to “do favors”. That’s a business that I don’t want to get into.” Jose paused; “Once you’re in, there’s no way out.”

I did know what it was like in Jose’s neighborhood, a marginal community built on the side of a ravine at the San Salvador city limits, and he was right. They – the local clique or cell group of one of the major street gangs – control the area. Despite a large and well-staffed police post in the center of the neighborhood, it is known that drugs, weapons and cash move in and out of the community with relative ease. Surrounded by this pervasive culture of illicit activity, it’s nothing short of a miracle that Jose and his family have remained reasonably untouched as long as they have.

I wept silently and listened as he shared his fears and frustrations. He told me of the conversation with a *coyote* who could help him cross the border in a semi-truck for the fee of \$6,000. Jose would have to pay half up front and the other half upon arrival, payment of which had been promised by a cousin living in Houston.

I felt so helpless to respond. He had clearly given this a lot of thought; what could I possibly say that might discourage him from this decision? When your reality includes 16-year-old boys going missing, never to be seen or heard from again, and 13-year-old girls impregnated as a means to claim them as gang “property”, somehow the dangers,

expense and lack of guarantee associated with making the journey north seem like the better of bad options.

As heart-wrenching as it is, stories like Jose’s are not uncommon. Still, much of the discussion is centered on the conditions that cause children, youth and families to migrate, and whether or not the insecurity and violence, economic strife, impoverishment and hunger they face in their countries of origin justifies being received as refugees or asylum-seekers upon arrival at the southern border of the United States. The media has also focused on the ongoing political debate surrounding the surge of young and unaccompanied migrants, and the immigration policies to be reformed or enacted in response to this crisis. But the exodus of tens of thousands of Central American children and families is much more than a border emergency or a humanitarian crisis, and meanwhile politicians on all sides are posturing, *the least of these*, our sisters and brothers continue to suffer – in the desert, in detention centers, as deportees.

Countless obstacles hinder the Central American dream of earning a dignified living and enjoying the company of family and friends in secure and peaceful communities, compelling many to opt for the Hollywood version of an American dream that is not their own. Not the least of these obstacles are the international policies and trade agreements adopted over the last decade that have proven to stifle holistic and lasting development in countries like El Salvador rather than promote it.

Case in point: the country of El Salvador has spent the better part of the last 5 years, and more than \$7 million, defending its decision to protect water and valuable natural resources from toxic contamination by not extending extraction permits to the transnational company Pacific Rim Mining, recently acquired by Australian company, Oceana Gold. The final hearing in this case was presented last month before the

International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes (ICSID), a tribunal of the World Bank in Washington, established under the Free Trade Agreement between the United States, Central America and the Dominican Republic (CAFTA-DR). Should the tribunal rule against El Salvador's sovereignty over its natural resources, in favor of the rights of the corporation to exploit the environment and extract gold for profit, the Salvadoran state will be obliged to pay the company more than \$300 million for potential lost profits for which the country is being sued.

As it is, the Salvadoran government struggles to budget for healthcare services, education, public security and programs for social welfare. Imagine what would happen if \$300 million of its annual budget disappeared: that's half the annual budget for the Ministry of Health, one-third of the budget for Education, 85% of the budget for the Ministry of Justice and Public Security, and more than three times the budget for Agriculture! With Free Trade Agreements significantly limiting the ability of El Salvador to govern responsibly for its citizens, children, families and young people like Jose will have little choice but to leave and seek opportunities elsewhere.

But there is hope.

The realization that the national government may have its hands tied with commitments to trade agreements has compelled communities, congregations, grassroots organizations and social justice groups in El Salvador to organize, advocate and act to defend their territories from the bottom up. Just one day before final arguments were presented at the ICSID, the people of San Jose Las Flores, in the Province of Chalatenango, voted overwhelmingly to ban mining at the local level to become the first municipality in El

Salvador free from mining, sustained by their municipal code.

The Joining Hands Network of El Salvador utilizes this model of organization, advocacy and action in its work toward guaranteeing food sovereignty and the Human Right to adequate food and water, currently threatened by metallic mining, dependence on non-native seeds, and the indiscriminate use of toxic agrochemicals. Our Salvadoran partners are inviting us to join our hands, hearts and voices with theirs so that, together, we might work at the local, national and global levels to transform the broken system that drives young people, children and families from their homes.

It is with heartfelt gratitude and appreciation that we acknowledge the many congregations and Presbyteries, with help from [Presbyterian Disaster Assistance](#), that have opened their doors to provide assistance to immigrant children and families. As people of faith, we are called to advocate for and offer a compassionate response to those pushed to choose between risking it all by leaving and risking it all by staying, and who have opted for the former. However, we must also commit as Christians to address the injustice – the structural sin – that is at the root of this issue, because even if it were possible to provide sanctuary to every child, youth and family forcibly displaced by the culture of violence and impoverishment of Central America's Northern Triangle of Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, it will no more resolve this crisis than will stricter immigration laws, expedited deportations, a bigger wall and a militarized border. The only way to stay this wave of migration is to work together to guarantee children, youth and families opportunities for a life with dignity and purpose in their home countries.

Thank you for considering a contribution to the response efforts of Presbyterian Disaster Assistance. You're invited to learn more about the transformative work of the Presbyterian Hunger Program (PHP) Joining Hands Network in El Salvador and to prayerfully consider a financial gift to help sustain this ministry and the Mission Co-Worker, Kristi Van Nostran, who accompanies our partners in El Salvador.