

GBCS Board Member Southern Border Delegation
Oct. 21-24, 2018
Myths & Realities Discussion Guide

Root Causes of Migration

Myth: US policy and procedure is increasingly fixated on the illegality and criminalization of immigration. It treats Central and South Americans migrating as threats to US's national security, cultural integrity, and economic well-being.

Reality: Families, women, and children from Central and South America are fleeing violence, oppression, and poverty in Central America in search of a better life.

Biblical & Theological Foundations:

Freedom of movement is one of God's good gifts to creation and essential to the abundant life. This includes humanity's freedom to migrate in order to survive and thrive. The Bible offers many accounts of how human migration is intimately linked to God's seeking, saving, healing, and liberating work in and through creation.

God, in the opening verses of Genesis, is depicted as migrant (Genesis 1:1). God's Spirit is on the move across the cosmic, chaotic depths calling creation into being.

God's free gift of creation is predicated on God's free gift of movement – flow, process, change. From the Earth's orbit around the sun ("to everything a season" Ecclesiastes 3:1-8), to the flow of life giving nutrients and energy through watersheds (Isaiah 41:16-18), to the movement of living creatures throughout their life (Gen: 1:20,30; Jeremiah 8:7); movement within and across ecosystems makes life possible on our planet.

Humans are no exception. Created in the image of God, humans share God's migrant Spirit.

Accounts of moving from one place to another in order to flee natural disaster (Noah and family; Genesis 6-9), political oppression and violence (Exodus 12:31-51 and Holy Family flight to Egypt Matthew 2:13-23), poverty (Jacob and family to Egypt Genesis 46, Ruth and Naomi Ruth 1:16), or to pursue the abundant life or religious vocation (Abraham and Sarah Genesis 12:1, Jesus Luke 9:58 and throughout the Gospels, Paul Acts, more or less everywhere) are central to the biblical narrative.

The Bible presents migration as an on-going human phenomena, not as a crisis to be managed or a policy problem to be solved. God's seeking saving, healing, and liberating grace is at work in and through migration stories. God is on the move with migrants (Exodus 13:21), accompanying them on their journey and calling them to new life in new places.

Questions for reflection:

1. What is your personal and family migration stories? What are the root causes these stories reveal?
2. What are the migration stories of people, especially women and children, at the southern border? What are the root causes these stories reveal?

3. What would it mean to imagine immigration policy from the perspective of people who migrate instead of the nation-state?

The Right to seek Asylum

Myth: Crossing a border without proper authorization and documentation is an illegal act.

Reality: The Geneva Convention, written in the wake of the horrors of World War II and as a response to the failure of Western nations to admit those fleeing the Nazi regime, establishes the right of individuals to seek asylum at a legal port of entry or, even, after entering a country without proper authorization or documentation. The US, a charter member of the Geneva Convention, is not living up to its responsibility to recognize the right to seek asylum. The US is deterring asylum seekers; prosecuting asylum seekers who entered illegally and forcing asylum seekers to wait at legal ports of entry.

Biblical & Theological Foundations:

Remembering the mistreatment of migrants throughout history, the Bible calls nations to welcome migrants, especially those fleeing violence and oppression, ensuring migrants have access to essentials for survival, and provide migrants with equal protection under the law.

Compassionate and just treatment of the widow, the orphan, and the migrant (often translated from Hebrew into English as “stranger”) is the biblical hallmark of a good society. Compassion and just treatment of people who migrate is grounded in the remembered migration of the Israelites which included mistreatment (Deuteronomy 10:17-19; 26:10-14).

This memory includes Abraham and Sarah who, responding faithfully to God’s call to start a new life and a new family in a new place, move from region to region. During their travels they enter and attempt to reside in the southern region of Gerar (Genesis 20:1-16) and Egypt (Genesis 12:10-20). In both cases, local hostility they encounter and fear for their life result in Sarah being sexually exploited and eventual removal from both regions.

Also remembered is The Israelites’ treatment in Egypt. Having at first been welcomed to Egypt, the Israelites are enslaved when a new Pharaoh who, out of xenophobic fear, enacts violent and oppressive policies of population control (Exodus 1:9-12).

These memories of mistreatment serve as the foundation for compassionate and just treatment of migrants when they enter a region and after they reside in that region. Migrants should be welcomed regardless of their country of origin or ethnicity, migrants should have access to essentials for survival (food, clothing), and migrants should have equal protection under the law (Deuteronomy 10: 17-19; 14:19; 23:17; 24:17; 25:19).

Jesus, building on this biblical tradition, equates the treatment of the migrant to treatment of himself and intimately connects that treatment to the promise of salvation and eternal life (Matthew 25:35-40). Perhaps, here, Jesus is remembering his own family’s need to flee the threat of Herod’s violent regime and the refuge they found in Egypt (Matthew 2:13-23)?

Questions for Reflection:

1. How were you and/or your family treated in your personal migration experience? How does the memory, or lack of memory, inform your view of migration?
2. What would it mean to re-think current US immigration policy, especially asylum and refugee policies, with goal of not repeating the mistake of turning away asylum seekers fleeing Nazi Germany during WWII?

Criminalization through Increased Arrests, Raids, Detainment, and Deportation

Myth: The zero-tolerance policy at the US/Mexico border will deter migrants from entering the US.

Reality: The zero-tolerance policy will not deter migrants from seeking a safer, better life in the US. It will only criminalize migrants, especially migrants of color, leading to increased surveillance, raids, arrests, detainment and deportation that traumatizes individuals, separates families, and disrupts communities.

Biblical and Theological Background:

Jesus and his disciples, who caravanned from Galilee to Jerusalem through several, diverse territories and communities, were surveilled by Roman-occupying authorities and raided (Matt 26:47-56; Mark 14:43-52; Luke 22:47-53; John 18:2-12). Jesus, himself, was arrested, detained, tortured, and executed (Matt 26:57-27:56; Mark 14:53-15:41; Luke 22:54-23:49; John 18:13-19:37). Jesus and his disciples were labelled illegal and criminalized for their movement of teaching and healing across the countryside.

Jesus was not a Roman citizen. Unlike Paul, a Roman citizen by birth who enjoyed freedom of movement, legal protection from torture and execution, and access to a hearing before the Emperor (Acts 22:22-29; 25:1-17), Jesus was not authorized to freely travel. His body, his life, were vulnerable and subject to brutal treatment. Jesus had no right, no recourse to imperial appeal.

While the primary, political goal of the authorities was to crush Jesus' movement and deter others from leading similar movements, the Gospel of John refuses to forget and overlook how the brutal, zero-tolerance, deterrence policies traumatized Jesus' family. In the final moments of his life, Jesus worried about the effect his arrest, torture, and execution would have on his family. He used his last breaths to ask his mother, Mary, and his beloved disciple to care for each other (John 19:25-27).

Questions for Reflection:

1. What is your personal experience with law enforcement? How is it related to your migration story?
2. How is criminalization of migration related to criminalization of people of color and people who live in poverty (i.e racial profiling, mass incarceration, police shooting, etc)?
3. In what way are people who are migrating part of a grass-roots movement, making a political statement? What power structures and systemic injustices are they resisting, protesting?