

Called to Welcome and Accompany Asylum Seekers



Photo credit - Peg Hunter

A study focused on the dedication of
faith networks at the U.S. California border

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INTRODUCTION

The study uniquely focuses on the profound dedication of a faith network encompassing organizations, congregations, and churches at the U.S. California border. This network has been instrumental in a compassionate response, extending its aid to people seeking asylum.

Today it is of utmost urgency to comprehend the myriad forces that compel individuals to abandon their homes. Equally crucial is our collective responsibility to engage and respond compassionately when these resilient displaced people are on the move. Often, they seek refuge where they have family or friends who could receive them and assist them in their journey to a new life.

This study's primary focus is California's Border with Mexico, a region where millions of people seek asylum and where many faith institutions and communities have been responding in various ways for years. It also aims to assist people of faith in discerning a compassionate response to asylum seekers and underscores existing networks' collaborative efforts in welcoming displaced people.

The study results from my involvement in a one-year fellowship with the Mercy Global Action Emerging Leaders program, as a participant of cohort 3. In 2023 and 2024, several immersions, webinars, and much learning took place to understand the global crisis and people's displacement. This study, a collaborative project with many resource links, helps the reader explore the many issues at their own pace. It also invites the reader to host a dialogue leading to collective discernment on responding to the call and helping displaced people.

DEFINITIONS

Migration - Human mobility - the natural movement of people has been a constant in human history.

Migrants - Persons moving within or between countries.

Displaced Persons - are people who flee their state or community due to fear or danger for reasons other than those that would make them refugees.

Asylum seekers - Persons who seek safety from persecution or serious harm in a country other than their own and await a decision on the application for refugee status under relevant international and national systems.

Refugees - Persons who, owing to a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinions, is outside the country of their nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail themselves of the protection of that country.

[Rodriguez, C. S. (2021). The lived experiences of adolescents seeking asylum in the United States with an intersectionality theoretical framework.

<https://core.ac.uk/download/489534711.pdf>

ACRONYMS

ICE - Immigrant and
Customs Enforcement

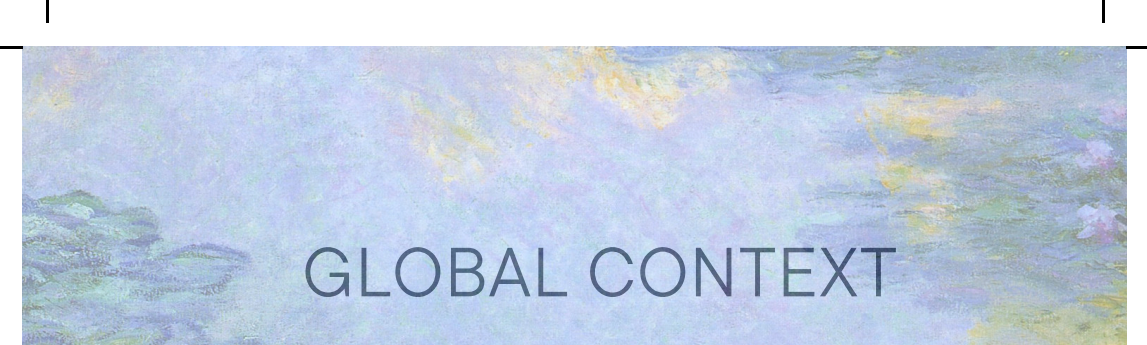
CBP - Customs and
Border Patrol

NEGATIVE IMPACT LANGUAGE TO AVOID

Illegal - The term illegal has a criminal connotation.

Undocumented - The better term is “lacking official admission.”

Alien - The term “migrant” or “foreign-born” is preferred since it does not deny humanity



GLOBAL CONTEXT

The UN Refugee Agency stated that there would be 110 million forcibly displaced people worldwide by mid-2023. The global displacement crisis continues to affect nearly every country due to factors such as war, natural disasters, climate change, degradation of the earth, criminal organizations, socioeconomics, and other political factors. The result is that people are on the move, looking for humanitarian aid as they migrate and seek a safe place to call home.

Asylum is protection grantable to foreign nationals already in the United States or arriving at the border who meet the international legal definition of a “refugee.” The United Nations 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol define a refugee as a person who is unable or unwilling to return to their home country and cannot obtain protection in that country due to past persecution or a well-founded fear of being persecuted in the future “on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.” Congress incorporated this definition into U.S. immigration law in the Refugee Act of 1980. Asylum is technically a “discretionary” status, meaning that some individuals can be denied asylum even if they meet the definition of a refugee. For those individuals, a backstop form of protection known as “withholding of removal” may be available to protect them from harm if necessary.

In the document *Breaking Boundaries: A Mercy Response to People on the Move*, the report highlights the imperative work of supporting migrants at the border. For people on the move, including the 280.6 million people migrating in 2021- 2022, the process of immigrating is often undignified and perilous. International borders can be dangerous places for migrants, particularly those who are (or who are presumed to be) in irregular situations. Many migrants lose their lives when they board unseaworthy boats, moving trains, or sweltering trucks when smugglers leave them to die at sea or in the desert or when border guards are given orders to deter irregular migration. At land, sea, and air borders around the world, migrants can experience discrimination and arbitrary decision-making, torture and sexual or gender-based violence, dangerous interception practices, and prolonged or arbitrary detention.

<https://www.mercyworld.org/f/45074/x/27c7ba22a5/breaking-boundaries-a-mercy-response-to-people-on-the-move.pdf>

“For Catherine saw in every stranger at the door, in everyone who was different from herself, in every person, the hidden presence of Christ, the approaching and approachable self-utterance of the near but distant otherness of God.”

(Sister Mary Sullivan, RSM, taken from the article
Welcoming The Stranger:
The Kenosis of Catherine McAuley)

CONTEXT WITHIN THE UNITED STATES

As a signatory to the 1967 Protocol, and through U.S. immigration law, the United States has legal obligations to protect those who qualify as refugees. The Refugee Act established two paths to obtain refugee status—either from abroad as a resettled refugee or in the United States as an asylum seeker. It is essential to note the difference in these terms. Refugee status in the U.S. is a process that begins abroad and will offer better reception and limited government resources upon arrival to the U.S. For persons seeking asylum, neither reception nor resources are granted by the government.



Photo credit - Peg Hunter

Photo credit - Peg Hunter

When people seeking asylum arrive in the United States and are taken into custody by Customs and Border Protection and then released at the border or from a detention center, they often need immediate assistance obtaining transportation to their final destination. In some rare circumstances, people may not have a final destination and need support finding a place to live while they go through the asylum process. Once the person arrives at their final destination, they often need additional local knowledge of navigating their ICE check-ins, court dates, and other everyday responsibilities. At this time, the asylum seekers need support from people in faith communities to accompany them as they settle in the community.

Over the last decade, the responsibility for assisting migrants in these circumstances has fallen almost exclusively to congregations, nonprofit organizations, and receiving communities in Democratic-led states.



Photo credit - Peg Hunter

Photo credit - Peg Hunter

CALIFORNIA CONTEXT

At the California border, a shelter provider network has helped people released from Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) and Immigrant and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) which is federal custody. Local organizations have worked closely with local CBP and ICE officials in some locations to coordinate the release of migrants. At other times, ICE and CBP have released people at gas stations, bus stops, and other places far from shelters and resources. This does not happen to refugees upon entering the country. Releasing migrants into a place they do not know or without language access has forced local organizations and local officials to scramble to respond and ensure migrants have the necessary assistance. Many states like New York, Illinois, and California stepped in 2023 due to the political climate in some southern states.



TEXAS CONTEXT

The state of Texas has been making it close to impossible for migrants to reach the border and seek asylum. State authorities have set up inhumane physical barriers like a string of buoys in the Rio Grande and set up razor-wire barriers along other parts of the border. [Operation Lone Star](#), a multi-billion dollar security initiative, has made it more difficult for migrants who manage to get through because they have been arrested and incarcerated with *trespassing charges since July 2021*. When lawsuits against these human rights violations followed, the Governor of Texas sent buses full of asylum seekers to Democrat-led states. Many of the migrants ended up in places that they did not intend to go.

In adding another layer of deterrence, Texas lawmakers approved Texas [Senate Bill 4](#), a law that would make it a state crime for migrants who did not have official admission to the country. The law would also allow police in the state to arrest people they suspected had entered the country without official admission. Senate Bill 4 is being challenged as unconstitutional and is being blocked by the U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals. So, in the Spring of 2022, the governor of Texas began to transport buses full of migrants released from federal custody to states that welcomed migrants.

THE PROBLEM

The category of asylum is treated differently than that of refugee. While very few refugees are admitted into the United States, the process for a refugee is more receptive. The government provides resources upon arrival through the Refugee Resettlement Program, such as initial reception, medical assistance, case management services, access to English classes, and job readiness and employment services. In stark contrast, asylum seekers must make their way to the U.S. border, where they face a lengthy wait to be interviewed by an ICE officer for vetting. Many of them end up in immigrant detention centers while they wait to be processed. Others if allowed to enter, can only access resources once their asylum case is granted, a process that can drag on for years. This clear disparity in treatment underscores the urgent need for a more equitable system.

There's a significant need for temporary respite housing in border cities. When immigrants are allowed in, they need a safe place to rest, connect with their family or friends and time to set up a traveling plan to be reunited with them. Some border cities are already welcoming but more involvement is needed, including yours. Democrat-led states stood up to the task and welcomed the buses sent from Texas, setting a powerful example of what we can achieve together.

Pope Francis: (place in corner on top of the page)

“Our response to the arrival of migrating persons can be summarized by four words: welcome, protect, promote, and integrate. For ‘it is not a case of implementing welfare programs from the top down, but rather of undertaking a journey together, through these four actions, in order to build cities and countries that, while preserving their respective cultural and religious identity, are open to differences and know how to promote them in the spirit of human fraternity.’” (Pope Francis, Fratelli Tutti 129).

Aurora's Story

This is a story about a brave migrant family from Central America who made the difficult decision to leave their home and face the challenges of a long journey. The mother tells the story of the many organizations that helped them. To protect her identity, I will call her Aurora.

Aurora and her family fled gang extortion in Guatemala. The extortions started with small fee payments to the gang for protection from other gangs. The family was well established, with two tortilla factories that provided for their entire family. The demand for money grew and they felt that their lives were at risk since the police and government in Guatemala didn't guarantee safety. In 2020, they fled to Mexico, leaving everything behind. The seven-member family, five adults, one of them a pregnant daughter and two grandchildren, did not look back. The plan was to reunite with Aurora's son, who lived in the United States.

Along the way, the family experienced houselessness, the birth of a grandbaby born in a shelter in Tapachula, Mexico, and the horrific experience of the entire family being kidnapped on their way to Tijuana. It was a traumatic ordeal that lasted four days. Aurora's son in the U.S. borrowed money to pay the \$10,000 dollar ransom that freed them. When the kidnappers received the money, they dropped the family off in a strange, dangerous border town unknown to them.

They arrived at the Mexico / U.S. border when a new border policy denied entry to asylum seekers due to the pandemic. The pandemic was not the only difficulty; for months, they lived in two different shelters where women and children stayed in separate facilities from the men. Not only was the separation of the family a challenge, but one of her daughters got Covid and was seriously ill. While seeking help for her sick daughter, Aurora came upon a network of organizations working at the border that made a big difference in their lives.

The family was allowed into a shelter in Mexicali, where a Sister of St. Joseph's of Carondelet, Sr. Suzanne from Border Compassion, met them. Aurora recalls that "from that moment on, our life changed for the better." Her daughter got medical attention from Doctors Without Borders. The engagement of various organizations and volunteers at this shelter helped them navigate the process of getting an interview with Immigration and Customs Enforcement but, they were about to experience separation once again. Aurora's children were married, so they needed separate interviews as separate families. After the ICE interview, each adult member's entry into the United States was granted at different times. This time, they had support from people of faith willing to help them once they were on the U.S. side.

Since Northern California was their destination, Sister Suzanne connected them to other nuns in Northern California and the Interfaith Movement for Human Integrity. It had been a year and two months since they had left their home in Guatemala. Some of them had finally made it. Interfaith Movement for Human Integrity has a program called the Nueva Esperanza Accompaniment Team that would help Aurora's family in their first few months.

This team consists of volunteer church members who commit to welcoming and helping newly arrived individuals in their community. Through this team, the family was welcomed, received spiritual support, and was connected to community resources to begin their new lives. Aurora and her family relied on the volunteers to navigate the unknowns in their community, translate for them, and help them fill out registration forms and work permit applications.

Aurora expresses her gratitude to Border Compassion, Sisters of St Joseph, and the Interfaith Movement for Human Integrity for supporting them in their new life in Richmond, CA. She said, "We are in a place where we feel safe and have friends, and I am grateful."

Recommendations

- **Learn** about this issue.
- **Advocate** for life-affirming policies
- **Act** - get involved
- **Invite others** to engage in this journey with you
- **Pray**

Eco Memories of Migration

Sara Fread, a graduate of Pacific School of Religion with a Master of Arts in Social Transformation, reflects on climate migration and eco-womanist theology, centering on Interfaith Movement for Human Integrity participant Misael Reyes and his family's experience with the hurricanes in Honduras several years ago.

<https://www.im4humanintegrity.org/2023/01/sacred-socio-ecological-interconnectedness-climate-change-refugees-and-the-eco-memories-of-migration/>

Debunk the Myths that feed into the narrative of fear

- Migration and people's movement are not invasions—the phenomenon of **migration is natural** and has existed since the beginning of time.
- Immigrants do not come to take away jobs. 2020 taught us that services continued thanks to the **essential workers**, who were immigrants. For example, immigrants continued working in the food, agriculture, warehouse, hospitality and delivery industries while many of us sheltered in place. Their contributions were **vital then and now** and should be recognized.
- Immigrants are not a burden to society. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) published a groundbreaking report, [*The Fiscal Impact of Refugees and Asylees at The Federal, State, and Local Levels From 2005 to 2019.*](#) This report was based on a comprehensive analysis of tax contributions, public service utilization, and economic impact.

- “**Refugees and asylees had a positive net fiscal impact on the U.S.** government over the 15-year period, totaling \$123.8 billion. The net fiscal benefit to the federal government was estimated at \$31.5 billion and approximately \$92.3 billion to state and local governments.”
- Contrary to popular belief, immigrants are not reliant on state welfare programs. **Immigrants are self-sufficient** and independent and contribute significantly to our tax system. This should instill confidence in their ability to stand on their own and reassure us of their positive impact on our society.
- They are not a threat to U.S. culture— **immigrants add to its beauty in diversity** and bring with them entrepreneurial experiences. These experiences often result in economic growth over the long run, contributing to the nation's overall prosperity.
- Asylum seekers and displaced persons are not the problem - the cause of the border crisis is political and not economical. The real problem is that many politicians refuse to respond compassionately and humanely for political gains.

Immigrants contributed an estimated \$363 billion to the federal government through payroll, income, and excise taxes and \$218 billion to state and local governments, through income, sales, and property taxes.

Advocate for Life-Affirming Policies

The Welcome With Dignity Campaign has urged the White House administration to pursue four concrete policy solutions to accomplish its border management goals. These solutions are achievable, actionable, and evidence-based.

Ask your elected officials to:

1. Properly staff ports of entry and expand access to asylum at ports of entry;
2. Establish a centralized office that works with agencies, states, localities, and nonprofits to coordinate and fund humane reception and integration of people seeking asylum;
3. Prioritize funding for more immigration court staff, interpreters, judges, and officers, and make work permit applications more accessible and efficient so migrants and their families can become independent sooner;
4. Invest in overseas and domestic refugee programs, allowing people with approved cases to travel to the U.S. safely and reunite swiftly with loved ones already here.

You can learn more about these solutions at welcomewithdignity.org/solutions

Act

Become Part of an Accompaniment Team

Accompaniment is the pastoral work of presence where you show up, meet with the newly arrived migrant and befriend them. It is humbling work where attention and listening are needed, prayers and experiences are shared, connections are made, and moral support is given to achieve the best possible outcome. The mission of accompaniment is to walk with migrants and guide them to community resources so they can thrive. This mission is about recognizing and valuing the migrant's journey and understanding that our role is to support and uplift them as they navigate a new life in our community.

Nueva Esperanza Accompaniment Teams Program (NEAT) trains teams of five congregational volunteers to walk alongside recently arrived immigrants during their first six months of resettling. Check out this video, "[From Root Causes to Sanctuary](#)" which features one of the families they have accompanied who won their asylum case. There are more [NEAT STORIES](#) to learn about families they have accompanied.



Lead a Small Group

Invite Your Faith Community to Get Involved

You and your faith community are crucial in our collective efforts to respond compassionately to asylum seekers. Set a date and time and invite others from your faith community to learn more about ways to help asylum seekers. Before you gather, share and assign parts of this document for further study and reflection. Invite the Holy Spirit to guide your learning, dialogue, and questions, and receive the blessings of these encounters!

Remember these golden rules for any meeting:

1. Start on time and end on time
2. Involve everyone who attends
3. Have an agenda ready

Purpose of the Meeting

- Share learnings about asylum seekers
- What are some of the resources we have to respond?
- What are some of the barriers that prevent a response?

Sample Meeting Agenda

Begin with a Prayer

May this time together help us discern our part in helping people on the move, foster personal growth, and deepen our spiritual connection. We invite the Holy Spirit to guide our dialogue and questions so that we may collectively see the answers. We know and trust that the Sacred One will provide what is needed once we say yes. **Amen.**

Introductions

- Introduce yourselves to each other.
- Take time to create meeting accords or ground rules.

Dialogue

- Take turns sharing what you learned about asylum seekers from the readings.
- Allow for questions and concerns.
- Create a list of barriers and take on the homework to learn how others overcame these challenges. Remember, you are not alone in this journey. A wealth of support and guidance is available to help you navigate these obstacles.

Next Steps

- Invite your group to connect to others who are working with asylum seekers and ask questions.
- Set a date for another meeting to create a strategic plan and ensure you are effectively and compassionately responding to the needs of asylum seekers.
- Your group may want to join a local organization that is already responding.

Adjournment

- Invite one of the participants to close with their prayer.

Acknowledging Community Response

At the California - Mexico border, the following organizations, congregations, and churches have created a network that has been instrumental in extending a compassionate response to asylum seekers. The reader is invited to learn from their websites and/or join non-profit organizations or congregations that are responding.

Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe & Casa de Misericordia

Casa de Misericordia volunteers are strong supporters of Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe's response to the needs of migrant men, who after their long journey to the U.S. and the interview process at the border need respite housing till they move on to their final destination.

<http://casademisericordiasd.org/>

Border Compassion

Border Compassion is a non-profit, faith-based, grassroots effort to respond to the needs of asylum seekers who have migrated to the Mexicali border. Its mission is to invite faith communities to experience a "crossover" from Calexico to the Mexicali border. Border Compassion also offers a compassionate humanitarian response to families living at the Cobina Posada del Migrante.

<https://border-compassion.org/>

Scalabrinians

The Congregation of the Missionaries of St. Charles —Scalabrinians—is an international community of religious serving migrants and refugees of different cultures, religions, and ethnicities in 35 countries and on five continents. Their missionary focus has been to be with migrants and to be in mission with people on the move, with a special priority for the poorest migrants.

<https://www.scalabrinians.org/>

Franciscan Network for Migrants

This link is to the Annual Report of the Franciscan Network for Migrants. An organization that has emerged from the commitment of Franciscan people working, accompanying, and living on the Americas' migratory routes.

<https://redfranciscana.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/RFM-ANNUAL-REPORT-2022.pdf>

Catholic Charities

And They Shall Know Us By Our Love invites you to learn more about the ministry of Catholic Charities border agencies, which is rooted in Catholic social teaching, and those who volunteer to help.

<https://www.catholiccharitiesusa.org/publications/and-they-shall-know-us-by-our-love/>

References and Resource Links Used for Research

1- American Immigration Council

The Council strives to strengthen the United States by shaping immigration policies and practices through innovative programs, cutting-edge research, and strategic legal and advocacy efforts grounded in evidence, compassion, justice, and fairness. They collaborate with diverse stakeholders, including policymakers, grassroots organizations, and immigrant communities, to advance results-driven solutions to the challenges facing immigrants and communities throughout the United States.

<https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/beyond-border-solutions>

2- Breaking Boundaries: A Mercy Response to People on the Move

A publication offered by Mercy World as an opportunity to reflect on, learn from, and celebrate Mercy's engagement with People on the Move.

<https://www.mercyworld.org/global-action/displacement-of-persons/migration/>

3- Interfaith Movement for Human Integrity

The Interfaith Movement for Human Integrity, a multi-faith-rooted organization, is driven by a set of core beliefs that resonate with our shared humanity. They believe in welcoming refugees, treating strangers as our own, and that compassion and love have no boundaries. These values have guided them in accompanying over 300 individuals from diverse backgrounds.

<https://www.im4humanintegrity.org/>

4-UNHCR

UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, is a global organization dedicated to saving lives, protecting rights, and building a better future for people forced to flee their homes because of conflict and persecution.

<https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/>

5- Newcomers Benefit U.S., New Study Finds

A new report from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) highlights the significant contributions made by refugees and asylum seekers to the U.S. economy and society. As HHS Secretary Xavier Becerra said, “This historic federal study is important data-driven evidence demonstrating that over time, refugees, asylees, and their immediate families have made significant positive fiscal contributions to our country.”

<https://www.hhs.gov/about/news/2024/02/15/new-hhs-study-finds-nearly-124-billion-positive-fiscal-impact-refugees-and-asylees-on-american-economy-15-year-period.html>



Thank You

During 2023 and 2024, I participated in several immersions, webinars, and much learning to understand the global crisis of people's displacement. I want to acknowledge Mercy International Association-Global Action for the opportunity to have this life-changing experience and make many global connections through this fellowship. I am most grateful to the Interfaith Movement for Human Integrity, where I work, for allowing me the time to participate in all the immersions. I want to thank my mentor, Sister Mary Waskowiak, and those organizations working in the community who took the time to offer answers and guidance.



I would also like to acknowledge the following people: Aurora for sharing her family's journey, Peg Hunter for her border wall photos, my friends who reviewed the document, and my daughter Monica, who beautifully designed these pages.

Mil Gracias!

Hilda Cruz is a Catholic woman and the Regional Program Director of the Interfaith Movement for Human Integrity in California. Hilda's daily life reflects her Latina culture's resilience, stories, prayers, songs, music, and beauty. Her interest in Mercy is deeply rooted in her journey as a first-generation immigrant, striving to dismantle systems of exclusion and oppression. Her work has earned her recognition as a *Change-Maker*, *Transforming Leader*, and *Latina of Influence*. Her most significant achievement is leading public, multi-faith prayer services for 11 years outside immigration detention facilities, where she centers the stories of justice-impacted immigrants. Their stories have been instrumental in raising awareness about the issues immigrants face and inspiring others to advocate and take action.

