

Being Church in the Borderlands: An Exploration of Ministry and Mission
of Rincon Congregational United Church of Christ
with Central American Migrants and Refugees

A Professional project submitted to the Theological School of Drew University in partial
fulfillment of the Requirements for the degree,
Doctor of Ministry

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DEDICATION

To My Local Advisory Team: Jerry Pipes, Nancy Woodling, Annabel Crites,

Laurie Olson, Fran and David Buss, and Donna Harrison

To my faithful friends and editors: Susie George, Pam Smith, Sharon Nicks,

Nancy Congdon, Callie Jordan, Donna Tetreault, Dean Hokel and Craig Sale

To members of my beloved congregation, Rincon Congregational

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To the Davis Memorial Scholarship Fund of Rincon Congregational

United Church of Christ. Without their commitment to fund seminary education for ordained ministers, I could have only dreamed this dream, but not actualized it.

ABSTRACT

BEING CHURCH IN THE BORDERLANDS: AN EXPLORATION OF MINISTRY AND MISSION OF RINCON CONGREGATIONAL UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST WITH CENTRAL AMERICAN MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES

Marie Von Delle McCormick

This D. Min project proposed to build bridges between self-identified people of power and privilege (members of RCUCC) and “people-made-poor” — specifically migrants and refugees forced by economic conditions to enter the U.S. without proper documentation to relocate and work in the U.S. We set out to engage participants and readers in a conversation amongst ourselves, other communities of faith, and migrants and asylum-seekers about the realities and needs of Central American migrants and refugees, especially children. We endeavored to discern what form our ministry would take as we experienced the real-world concerns of this vulnerable population. We explored the theories and practices of *solidarity*, *accompaniment*, *hospitality*, and *sanctuary* with the goal of determining language and ministry that takes into account differences in power and privilege and individual and collective agency on both sides of the border, and articulates and embodies a just and compassionate response to the immigration issues that we experienced.

We chose not to focus on critiquing and reinterpreting mission, and instead focused on ministry, especially Jesus’ ministry on earth, that embodied a discipleship of equals in which all involved exercised their own agency to one degree or another and assumed transformation of the actors and their communities. Through a careful and prayerful process of contextual learning,

discovery, and discernment, we found that our work together enlivened the congregation and those with whom we serve. While our original plan for was to explore “ministry and mission” of RCUCC with Central American migrants and refugees,” we found our focus drawn to a broader understanding of ministry, to a borderland ecclesiology that included every aspect of being church together with our neighbors to the South. We began to see that the “product” of this D. Min “Being Church in the Borderlands” project extended to everything we did as church, from small group work, to worship, to our use of our land and facilities, to service opportunities, to the stewardship of our resources – to our embodied practice of being the “hands and feet, body and breath of Christ” here on earth.

CONTENTS

| | |
|--|-----|
| PREFACE: HOW FAR WOULD YOU WALK? | 1 |
| CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION—BEING CHURCH IN THE BORDERLANDS..... | 4 |
| CHAPTER 2: TWO CONGREGATIONS—WORLDS APART | 24 |
| CHAPTER 3: BORDERLAND THEOLOGY | 43 |
| CHAPTER 4: THE HEMORRHAGING SOUTH | 52 |
| CHAPTER 5: PREPARING A WAY THROUGH THE DESERT | 59 |
| CHAPTER 6: FOLLOWING JESUS ACROSS BORDERS | 71 |
| CHAPTER 7: WORDS MATTER | 84 |
| CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSIONS | 108 |
| APPENDICES | 117 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY..... | 123 |

PREFACE: HOW FAR WOULD YOU WALK? ¹

When I first encountered the tiny handprint of a small child in the middle of nowhere in the Sonoran Desert – that vast stretch of land bordering Arizona and Sonora, Mexico – I sensed that God was giving me a sign of the direction I would take after eight years of ministry in Central and Southern Mexico. After serving as a missionary with the Common Global Ministries in Chiapas, Mexico, I was sent home to “be a missionary to my own people,” and itinerated through thirteen states, sharing the “Gospel of Chiapas” in local congregations of the United Church of Christ.

On one visit to Southern Arizona, I accompanied Pastor Randy Mayer of the Good Shepherd UCC on a “water run” for Humane Borders, where we filled large blue water tanks and placed tall flags nearby so migrants could identify water sources from some distance away. As we stopped at our last, and most remote water station, I saw a tiny handprint in the desert soil, the sure evidence that a migrant child had been there before me. No parent in their right mind would take a child into such a desolate and isolated place; only those whose very lives and the lives of their children depended on their crossing the desert between our two countries would have braved the elements to be there. As I touched that tiny print, I wondered whether that child made it *al otro lado*, to the other side, or whether she succumbed to the crushing heat and dangerous terrain. As I left that place, I carried that child and her parents with me, as silent witnesses to the horrors of forced migration.

¹ An entry from my Journal: 2008, Tucson, AZ.

Since then, I have been to the desert many times and witnessed evidence of many lives left behind. The once pristine hiking trails through the desert are now littered with the precious “stuff” of people’s lives. I recall a desert walk with professors from Chicago when we came upon what is known as a lay-up site, where migrants who have crossed the desert must leave behind anything that identifies them as “walkers.” We sat and wept, confronted with tons of “migrant trash” – baby bottles and diapers, women’s make-up, toothbrushes, Bibles, bicycles, high heel shoes, clothes, and love letters. Even the most tender and private possessions lay open to our strangers’ gaze. “Trophy trees” draped with pretty panties and bras commemorated the place where women’s bodies and souls had been violated. Sanitary products, bras and panties, birth control pills, even breast cancer medicine were strewn about as though some tornado had swept the people away and carried them far from their belongings.

One day while on a volunteer Samaritan Patrol, to search for migrants hurt or left behind and to provide food, water and medical supplies, I found a Dora backpack with a soiled pair of child’s panties inside. Her mom’s make-up and perfume were in a small pocket. What had they gone through out there in the middle of nowhere? How could the child have possibly withstood the dangerous passage? What happened to them? Had their bones quickly turned to dust beneath the scorching sun, or had they made it across the border, with yet a new struggle before them?

Among the items found was a worn walking stick with a cord attached and two little nooses at each end, perfect to fit the tiny wrists of a child. This was one woman’s way to keep her children safe in the least safe of circumstances. The desert is a dangerous place; the pace that migrants must keep in the dark of the night is brutal. Temperatures in the desert can vary over

100 degrees between morning and night. Perilous terrain, snakes, wild animals, sharp thorns, shallow underground tunnels all make night travel a nightmare. Women with children carry a shawl or plastic bag to shield them from the elements, but far too many have died there, unable to keep up, lost, dehydrated and hot. Their bones are all that are left after a few days.

Yet, like the women at Jesus' tomb, they keep coming because they know that life must go on. They get up and go on, driven by the violence which they have lived through to make a better life for themselves and their children. People often ask me what kind of parent would put themselves and their children through this. I ask them as I ask you, dear reader: how far would you walk to feed your child?

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION—BEING CHURCH IN THE BORDERLANDS

What I heard, and continue to hear, is a voice that can crack religious and political convictions open, that advocates for the least qualified, least official, least likely; that upsets the established order and makes a joke of certainty. . . It doesn't promise to solve or erase suffering but to transform it, pledging that by loving one another, even through pain, we will find more life. And it insists that by opening ourselves to strangers, the despised or frightening or unintelligible other, we will see more and more of the holy, since, without exception, all people are one body: God's.

— Sara Miles, *Take This Bread: A Radical Conversion*

“Being Church in the Borderlands: An Exploration of Ministry and Mission of Rincon Congregational United Church of Christ (RCUCC) with Central American Migrants and Refugees” examines the intersection between the global immigration crisis and a closer, more intimate experience of the crisis as a local church in the borderlands between the U.S. and Mexico. This project builds bridges between self-identified people of power and privilege (members of RCUCC) and “people-made-poor”—specifically migrants and refugees forced by economic conditions to enter the U.S. without proper documentation to relocate and work in the U.S.

What does our faith say about living and being church in the borderlands? What does scripture reveal about borders and their life-giving and life-denying potential? How do we bridge difference and distance, to love God with all our hearts, minds and souls and love our neighbors as ourselves?” These questions and research findings, while specific to the exploration of ministry and mission between RCUCC and Central American migrants and refugees on the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, also could bring new insights and understandings to congregations beyond our church that are seeking connection with similar populations in their communities.

Although the church I serve in Tucson, Arizona literally is situated in the borderlands of the U.S. and Mexico, every church today is confronted with the reality of being church in the borderlands. Borders are drawn and redrawn as people and politics explode our concepts meant to separate “us” from “them.” Since the presidential elections of 2016, sharper lines have been drawn between socio-economic, gender, ethnic, religious, and political groups. Navigating borders with respect and care with a willingness to shift our centers of power are essential to creating a world in which all worlds fit.

In *Beyond Theological Tourism*, Susan Thistlethwaite critiques liberal theological education’s use of the phrase “solidarity with the oppressed” as the religiously and morally appropriate response to oppression and suffering, suggesting that best efforts to engage in solidarity can easily devolve into a kind of “theological tourism” in which students and professors unintentionally engage in the use and abuse of communities with whom they help. Thistlethwaite asks the question: “How do you provide pedagogy for oppressors?”² *Theological tourism* is the term she uses to describe North American (U.S.) seminary education that does not unpack power and privilege in the process of contextual learning. She unpacks the ramifications of spending thousands of dollars on theological education abroad, while the money spent on travel could save lives among the communities visited. Her work suggests pedagogies of the oppressor (my words, not hers) that help to address power imbalances and go beyond surface encounters.

² Susan Thistlethwaite, *Beyond Theological Tourism: Mentoring a Grassroots Approach to Theological Education* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2003). 3.

My experience of theological tourism is a *vacation* with Christ, rather than a process of discerning *vocation* with Christ. The tourist goes to observe, enjoy, and “consume” rather than to transform and be transformed. In this D. Min project, I endeavored to create, as much as possible in such a short period of time, subject-subject relationships and an educational process that empowers both visitor and visited to take the next right steps toward liberation for all of God’s people. Because I am known in migrant and refugee communities and am fluent in Spanish, I can help to bridge difference and find connections through the listening to and telling of story. Rather than the production of a paper, participants are supported and encouraged to discern next steps for ministry and mission at RCUCC.

The project entailed three facilitated cross-cultural, immersion experiences in which participants from Rincon visited church or church-related projects in the borderlands in the U.S. and Mexico that are dedicated to ministry with migrant and refugees on the U.S.-Mexico and Mexico-Guatemala borders. Participants met with local leaders to understand the realities of each particular context and culture, *push and pull* causes of immigration,³ U.S. immigration policy and practice, and church-related ministries with migrants and asylum-seekers, including encounters in a shelter, soup kitchen, and a local high school. We experienced “church” in relationship with a neighboring United Methodist Church, Jesuit priests and Catholic Religious women and men in ministry with migrants and refugees on route to or from the north, and a free

³ Push factors are those conditions or circumstances that cause people to leave their homes and move to a new place in hopes of better conditions. Pull factors are those conditions and circumstances that induce or attract people to move to a location. These can be economic, political, social, and environmental conditions. In today’s reality, escaping violence is often the primary factor causing people to flee their homes.

legal clinic in a high school cafeteria for those who faced deportation as a result of new Immigrations and Customs Enforcement guidelines in 2017.

Specific information about each immersion experience follows:

1. January 17, 2017: The Inn Project, Christ United Methodist Church, Tucson – A two-hour orientation and tour of a temporary shelter for Central American women and children migrant/refugees that is operated by Christ UMC, a close neighbor to RCUCC.
2. April 4, 2017: Kino Border Initiative (KBI) – A full-day visit to Nogales, Sonora with the Jesuit binational organization dedicated to help make humane, just, workable migration between the U.S. and Mexico a reality. They provide direct assistance and accompaniment of migrants, social and pastoral care of communities on both sides of the border, and research and advocacy to transform U.S. immigration policy and practice. KBI is a joint project of The California Province of the Society of Jesus, Jesuit Refugee Services/U.S., The Missionary Sisters of the Eucharist, The Mexican Province of the Society of Jesus, the Catholic Diocese of Tucson and of Hermosillo, Sonora, MX. The Nazareth House women’s shelter and the *comedor* (soup kitchen) are staffed by volunteers from the local area and around the world who come from diverse backgrounds, ages, and abilities, with many from inter-religious settings.
3. April 27, 2017: “Keep Tucson Together” a Tucson non-profit and free legal clinic at Pueblo High School – A free legal clinic designed to provide legal support to members of protection networks and the community at large. Keep Tucson Together works with

volunteer attorneys and faith communities to create a network of resources for vulnerable and at-risk families.

Goals of this project included the following:

- Design, facilitate and evaluate contextual learning immersion experiences for RCUCC members and friends in Arizona and Sonora, Mexico.
- Reflect on the lived realities of migrants and refugee asylum-seekers from Central American countries as read through the lens of the biblical narrative of the “hemorrhaging woman.”
- Develop an understanding of issues surrounding immigration (migrants and asylum-seekers) to the U.S. from Central America.
- Explore the understanding and practice of ministry and mission between our church and refugees and migrants from Central America, developing both language and practices that go beyond “mission” and “ministry” to envision a world in which real and meaningful hands-on relational ministry exists.
- Embody healing, consoling, liberating ministry and mission at and through RCUCC.

Local Advisory Committee (LAC)

I had no problem with recruiting for the LAC, which began with the inception of this project in the fall of 2015. RCUCC members and friends were eager to join in on this project,

and to be my cheerleaders throughout the process. Enthusiasm was unabated through the first year of the project design, implementation, and evaluation. Members of the LAC also became a driving force in the obligation of church members and friends to act on our faith, to step out in ministries of advocacy and accompaniment of migrants and asylum-seekers.

The core group consisted of six Rincon members and friends. We met twice but communicated regularly via email updates and feedback. I was fortunate to have LAC individuals on my team who are deeply involved in immigration issues, one published author, two of the longest-time RCUCC members who were also teachers and great editors, and two others who “get” being church in the borderlands. They encouraged me to include my stories and poetry with my other writing, to show the human face of the border crisis, and at least one member came to every mini-immersion experience. Four participated in my site visit with Dr. Terry Todd, and another wanted to attend but had nine teeth extracted and couldn’t attend.

Colleagues and friends have also encouraged and counseled me through this period, dropping off meals or cooking for me, and supporting my self-care throughout. Most of all, the committee’s joyful and generous support buoyed me through the times that I doubted whether this project would matter in the grand scheme of things. Because I got a later start than anticipated for the research phase, the priests at the migrant project in southern Mexico, the last immersion experience, could not accommodate our delegation. However, in July of 2017, Rev. Conrado Zepeda, SJ traveled to Tucson to rest and recuperate from his ministry with migrants at the southern border of Mexico. Father Conrado was going to lead the delegation to the border of Mexico and Guatemala, so his visit provided an opportunity for him to speak at Rincon, thus bringing his personal border experience to us. The arc of this project has bent toward

connections we never dreamed would materialize. This moment with Father Conrado was one such experience.

Terminology

Migrant

For the purposes of this study, a migrant is one who immigrates to the U.S. without legal documentation permitting entry, seeking to escape violence, discrimination, exploitation, and/or oppression. Others migrate to find better economic opportunities, to study, or be with family. Most migrants cannot for one reason or another obtain legal permission to enter the U.S. Migrants have crossed back and forth between the U.S. and Mexico for many years, sometimes legally sanctioned, but more often not. Since the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon on September 11, 2001 heightened security on U.S. borders has meant that very few temporary workers are allowed legal entry. As economic conditions south of the U.S. border worsened and violence wrought by poverty increased, an ever-increasing number of migrants seek to enter the country without proper documentation. Those who immigrate legally do not face the same risks, cost, and consequences of those who enter the U.S. without proper documentation and are more commonly referred to as immigrants or legal visitors.

Asylum-seekers/refugees

According to Article 1 of the 1951 UN Convention, as modified by the 1967 Protocol, a refugee is defined as a person who “owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail

himself of the protection of that country.”⁴ In the case of refugees from Central America, they are both economic migrants and also are fleeing gang or sectarian violence, corruption, and/or persecution for religious, political, sexual orientation, and gender identity reasons.

Background and Method

The design of this D. Min project comes out of my own lived experience in 1989 of having my world turned upside down through a cross-cultural, immersion experience in Central Mexico with my Philadelphia Presbyterian Church. In a thoughtful application of Paulo Freire’s pedagogical model of “See-Judge-Act”, our delegation of church members encountered God-made-manifest in and through people-made-poor, who, being church together were engaged and engaging the Word in and through their lives. We witnessed the agency of people so beaten down by oppression and violence, yet gathered together as church, who were successful agents of positive social change in their own lives and in their communities. We learned an Action-Reflection-Action process from them that we used daily, which led us toward a process Freire coined *conscientization, or critical consciousness*. Beverly Wildung-Harrison describes *conscientization* as “the process of connecting our private experiences with communal experiences of systemic injustice. Each individual begins to see and articulate her experiences as a part of larger patterns and gains liberation with the group.”⁵ Through the process of

⁴ Ionel Zimfir, “Refugee Status under International Law,” last modified 2015. Accessed December 31, 2017, <https://epthinktank.eu/2015/10/27/refugee-status-under-international-law/>.

⁵ Beverly Wildung Harrison and Carol S. Robb, *Making the Connections: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 243.

conscientization, I begin to understand my oppression as it connects with yours, just as my liberation connects with your liberation.

From my own first intense, fearful, and joyful experience with Freire's engaged and engaging model, I came to know and trust the value of the popular education pedagogy of immersion experiences over those of theological tourism. Since that first experience, I have designed and led many such church delegations, to Central and Southern Mexico, and to Guatemala, acting as a bridge to facilitate delegation members fully entering a culture and context very different from their own. I continue to be amazed by how these exchanges deepened my and participants' understanding and experience of ministry, putting a human face on "people-made poor",⁶ and expanding the sense of story beyond self, to include both God and "neighbor." While I haven't measured the quantifiable results of these delegations on individuals and their churches, I have witnessed the qualitative results; through their lives and the ministries of their churches be transformed were as a result of these experiences. Thus, I will use the pedagogical model I first encountered as a participant in a cross-cultural immersion experience with my Presbyterian Church in Central Mexico.

For this project, I have adopted Sarah J. Tracy's *phronetic* approach, with an understanding, "that qualitative data can be systematically gathered, organized, interpreted, analyzed, and communicated so as to address real world concerns."⁷ Tracy writes in the forward

⁶ A phrase I coined to highlight the process of impoverishment. People "made-poor" by people, not created poor by God.

⁷ Sarah J. Tracy, *Qualitative Research Methods*, (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell Publishing, 2013), 4.

to her book, "Good writing engages the reader as a participative audience. A good read is dialogic and creates space for conversation."⁸ My D. Min research project will engage participants and readers in a conversation about ministry with Central American migrants and refugees, especially children. What form will our ministry take as we experience the "real world concerns" of this vulnerable population? Will words like *solidarity*, *accompaniment*, *hospitality*, and *sanctuary* resonate in our ministries? If not, is there new language for ministry that takes into account differences in power and privilege and individual and collective agency on both sides of the border? Is there a better way of naming and claiming a commitment to ministry and mission with Central American refugees?

This project also seeks to "know," in as much as that is possible, the "real world concerns" of migrants and refugees from Central America. Why do people from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador risk everything to enter the U.S. without proper documentation? Why do children make this perilous journey alone? Why would parents allow or even send their children out on their own? What are the implications of this massive population shift from the south to the U.S.-Mexico border for our mission and ministry as church?

Sarah Tracy's emphasis on research that matters in the larger and smaller scope of things is based on the *phronetic* approach research method that both identifies a narrative of concern and opportunity, and "contextual knowledge that is interactively constructed, action oriented and imbued with certain values," thus "open[ing] a path for possible social transformation."⁹ I

⁸ Ibid., xiv.

⁹ Ibid., 4.

appreciate Tracy's acknowledgement that a qualitative research method utilizing the *phronetic* approach leads to a "disciplined voyeurism," which at least offers a more balanced approach for engagement in contextual learning experiences. This project will also utilize Tracy's praxis-centered¹⁰ research methods in order to "offer more than a snapshot, providing understanding of a sustained process . . . and to explore how positive issues like passion, energy, compassion, or resilience may be constructed and maintained."¹¹ As we live into increasingly challenging times post-election, our church will need these positive byproducts of engagement in order to enliven and sustain us in our life-long journey as disciples of Jesus.

I also found Savage and Presnell's method of *narrative inquiry* compatible with this study. In *Narrative Research in Ministry*, they suggest an approach that provides a "window into reality... a dynamic structure that unfolds, evolves, changes... each window allowing a freshness of an interactive narrative."¹² In *Liberating Scholarly Writing*, Robert Nash writes, "Good teaching, good helping, and good leadership, in one sense, are all about storytelling and story evoking."¹³ In an interview, author and poet Brian Doyle, gives voice to the rich potential in storytelling: "Stories are holy and nutritious and crucial. Stories change lives; stories save lives... They crack open hearts, they open minds. We could change the world if we told the right

¹⁰ Applying, engaging, or practicing a theory.

¹¹ Tracy, 5.

¹² Carl E. Savage et al., *Narrative Research in Ministry: A Postmodern Research Approach for Faith Communities* (Louisville: Wayne E. Oates Institute, 2008), 47.

¹³ Robert Nash, *Liberating Scholarly Writing: The Power of Personal Narrative* (New York and London: Teachers' College Press, 2004), 2.

story.”¹⁴ It is this interactive and fresh narrative that this project seeks to discern: storytelling and story-evoking as bread for the journey for Be-ing the Church. Through this project, participants wove together their experiences in mini-immersion experiences in the borderlands with the story of the hemorrhaging woman from Mark’s gospel, and the stories of women and children migrants and asylum-seekers from Central America. In the process, new stories will emerge among participants and the church as newly acquired knowledge, passion, and commitments to ministry with Central American immigrants and refugees. This project seeks to accompany RCUCC members and friends on journeys that open hearts and minds, and document, as much as possible, the positive changes that result.

Finally, Miguel de la Torre, Professor of Ethics and Latinx Studies, author and activist, insists on “an ethics of place” as foundational method for theological research, advising the scholar to do more than reflect on what “those poor migrants go through” and “be present, to occupy the space of the undocumented and their allies.”¹⁵ But we can never really fully occupy the space that vulnerable and at risk peoples experience. We retire to the comfort and safety of our lives. We write at a great distance and the dissonance between our experience and theirs quickly fades. Our research subjects easily become objects in the practice and politics of academy and church.

¹⁴ Amy Wang, “Oregon Author Brian Doyle Has Brain Tumor,” Oregon Live, November 21, 2016, accessed September 11, 2017, http://www.oregonlive.com/books/index.ssf/2016/11/brian_doyle_brain_tumor.html

¹⁵ Miguel A. De La Torre, *Doing Christian Ethics from the Margins*, 2nd edition, revised and expanded. ed. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2014)., Kindle Edition, 173-175.

Self-disclosure

Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz asks the important question: “Who benefits from this?”:

[M]ujerista theology challenges the so-called objectivity of traditional theology that refuses to recognize that it often tends to benefit the status quo at the expense of those who are marginal in church and society. The status quo is not a natural arrangement but rather a social construct originating with and maintained mainly by white, Euro-American males. Traditional theology offers intellectual backing for religious understandings and practices at the core of our churches, and it is easy to see who are those in charge of our churches.¹⁶

The answer to “Who benefits from this?” in this D. Min project will not be *the status quo* at the expense of those who are marginal in church and society. By practicing self-disclosure, I expose my perspectives and those of my congregation as we engage the perspectives of others. But always it is important to remember that there is no leveler of playing fields for social and theological research. All results will be tainted with our own perspectives as pastor and members of RCUCC.

This research project is meant to serve as a bridge over which other faith communities might cross to engage more deeply with self, God and neighbor across difference, dissonance, and distance with the hope that this will inspire others to locate themselves in the context of being church in the borderlands, exploring God’s Good News at the intersections between political, social, geographical, ideological, and theological borders.

¹⁶ Ibid., Locations 1112-1116.

In *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for Twenty-First Century*, Professor of Christian Ethics and Theology Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz “denounces any and all objectivity,” which, she writes, “is really a cover for the subjectivity of those with power and privilege to impose their perspective.”¹⁷ She calls for self-disclosure of the researcher:

“I am obliged to reveal my concrete story within the framework of the social forces I have lived in. I am called to reveal the pivotal forces and issues that have formed me and that serve as my main points of reference. The idea in this kind of self-disclosure is to situate the subject, in this case myself, so that my discourse is understandable to others not only out of their own experience but insofar as they have the ability to go beyond the limits of their experience and see how my experience, because it is part of the processes of living, relates to and intersects with their experience, no matter how different both experiences are. In other words, the particulars of my life might not be something others can relate to easily, but, by knowing a little about them, others will be able to find some point of contact, at least because of similarities in the processes of our lives. Thanks to those points of contact, others will be able to understand me and assess what I say without necessarily agreeing with me or limiting me to the scope of their experience.”¹⁸

I include a section below on self-disclosure and positionality in an effort to lay the foundation from which to launch my research and findings.

What brought me to this work?

My Call to ministry came through a series of border-crossings. I always had one foot on both sides of the border; North and South, Black and White, liberal and traditional, Southern and

¹⁷ Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century*. Orbis Books, Kindle Edition, 1102-1104.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 1105-1111.

“Yankee” (pejorative term which I understood to mean people from “up North” and “different” in a negative way), heteronormative and questioning. I left home at nineteen, ostensibly to marry but actually to get out of a life where I walked a fine line between being myself and being who others wanted me to be. I moved far away, and then farther still until I got enough space and courage to shed the layers of self that had been given to me, but were never wholly mine.

Born to middle class White parents in the deep South, I was a girl child who did not fit into easy categories. I heard it whispered in adult circles that I was a *tomboy* and intuited that this way of being I so loved was not acceptable to my parents. In my home, *tomboy* was a pejorative label for girls who liked vigorous outdoor activities, clothes and behaviors that were considered stereotypically masculine. As a *tomboy* I played rough and loud, more outside than in, dug and defended forts, made blood oaths, dissected dead animals, and preferred cowboys’ outfits to that of cowgirls. When I announced to my first-grade class that I wanted to be a cowboy or a “colored maid” (colloquial language at that time for Black housekeeper) when I grew up, the elementary school principal called my mom and she doubled down on her worries that I was not on the right path. She plied me with dolls, which I took to, but took them outside to camp, fish and explore. She taught me to sew and cook, and that did stick as I began to want to fit in and please others more than myself. My aunt suggested Charm School, so my mom sent me—twice—when I was an early teen, hoping that as I learned how to set a table, apply makeup, and walk like a model I would lose my *tomboy* ways.

I held out against cultural norms in more ways than one. When it came to attending church with my family, I left when I was seven to look for Jesus outside of my southern Methodist church. My mom would drop me at the Baptist, Catholic, and Presbyterian churches

while the rest of the family dutifully followed white-washed, watered-down Jesus in the tall steeple church downtown. I never did find Jesus until much later, and then it was across the border in Mexico.

My experiences as and with the “other” in my family and society deepened as racism seeped into my pores as a child growing up in the deep South. I attended segregated schools and lived with “Whites only” signs on water fountains and restrooms, but my experience of living with people of African American descent revealed a different reality entirely. When I was invited by our housekeeper to go home with her and meet her children, which was considered scandalous behavior in those days, I was allowed to go—and found a normal happy family, not scary or “bad” in any way.

I managed to live within the dissonance of a sexist, racist, and homophobic reality for many years, but was always aware of the borderlands between the dominant cultural and marginalized people and communities. I could safely cross borders without risking my power and privilege, but each time I returned to the safety and sameness of home, I was less myself. I did become a model and married, but always felt that I didn’t fit into my family of five. I pushed back on almost every family norm that was handed down to me. I became a hippie-want-to-be in the sixties and fell for the guy I met at the beach over spring break. I read Martin Luther King and Malcom X and followed Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem as I began my own family as an upward-climbing young woman of the seventies. But I never escaped the dissonance between the freedom I felt through the budding women’s liberation movement of the late ’60s and ’70s and my upbringing as an impeccable hostess and housewife, a full-time mom, and model-perfect wife. I didn’t fit well into a marriage in which I was expected to take a back seat to my husband

and be satisfied with the tight confinement of patriarchal convention. I lived a lifestyle that rubbed me raw and robbed me of the space to live into my own God-given potential. My life was a mess and fraught with family drama. I was unhappy.

When family alcoholism finally brought me to my knees, begging God to show me how to change, I was led to an Al Anon Twelve Step Program for friends and families of alcoholics. Walking through the door to a meeting for the first time was, for me, like traveling alone to the moon. I was terrified. I learned though that if I showed up, God met me. Then I could take the next step, where God met me. Then the next and the next. Later I would find scriptural stories that confirmed my experiences of God-made-manifest in and through my life and the lives of the other women in the Twelve Step “rooms”, but I had to live it before I could believe it.

As I began to live inside my own skin and not one made to fit me, I came upon Gladwyne Presbyterian Church (GPC). I had not expected to ever return to the institutional church, but this Presbyterian faith community extended a radical welcome to all of God’s people and didn’t just worship Christ, they followed Jesus.¹⁹ This predominantly White, wealthy, educated congregation formed respectful relations across all kinds of borders with people of different ages, abilities, gender identities, race and ethnicities, religious, and social status. It was in this church that I first experienced Church as an agent of positive social change, one that encouraged and equipped its members to live into a deeper and wider faith, and that carried people back and forth across borders, forever changed with each crossing.

¹⁹ Robin R. Myers, *Saving Jesus from the Church: How to Stop Worshiping Christ and Start Following Jesus* (New York: Harper One, 2009).

I went to Mexico for the first time on a mission trip with GPC members to the faith-based Cuernavaca Center for Intercultural Dialog and Development (CCIDD), which no longer exists today.²⁰ I had traveled to Mexico before as a tourist but had never felt the deep sense of connection and transformation that I did in Cuernavaca. This and subsequent trips took me deeper into the cultures and customs of the people not obscured by the Americanization of Mexico's tourist destinations. Not understanding much Spanish on that first trip, I had to focus all my senses on listening, which in turn opened my heart and mind to an embodied experience of God made manifest in and through the *campesino* farmers, artisans, labor organizers, activists, church leaders, and refugees from Central America. Men and women who had fled the wars in Central America in the '80s and found sanctuary in Mexico taught me courage and commitment, and resurrection practice in the face of evil and suffering.

In Mexico I found a model of church in Christian Base Communities and Latin American Liberation Theology that awakened my desire to go beyond the borders of my own understanding of church and society to a greater awareness of being church beyond borders. How could God be calling this Anglo woman who spoke little Spanish to be engaged as church across geographical, economic, religious, social, educational, cultural, and nationalistic borders? I wanted more of it. Before my senior year of seminary, I returned to Mexico to study Spanish for five weeks and stayed for a year and a half. This time, I returned to the retreat center where I

²⁰ CCIDD was a tri-national ecumenical Christian retreat center in Cuernavaca, Morelos, Mexico rooted in an inclusive and liberating Latin American Liberation Theology. Its mission was to provide opportunities for churches and other groups from the U.S. and Canada to encounter God in the struggle for justice in Mexico and Central America and raise awareness and inspire action for social transformation together as neighbors across borders.

had first encountered popular education to raise awareness and inspire action for positive social change. After graduating from seminary, I was ordained to ministry in the United Church of Christ to serve as the Director of that same center, and directed programs that would be a life-changing for many participants from universities, seminaries and local faith groups from the U.S. and Canada. Almost thirty years later, I still meet people I taught who attribute their call to ministry, especially a ministry on the margins and borders of society, to their experience at CCIDD.

My experiences of being church through the GPC on the Mainline in Philadelphia and the Cuernavaca Center of Intercultural Dialog and Development in Cuernavaca, Mexico imprinted a model of church on me which was directed both *inwardly*, caring for its members and local community and deepening spiritual practices, and *outwardly*, following the teachings and practices of Jesus. Throughout my twenty years of ordained ministry, I have facilitated immersion experiences, brokering border-crossing encounters between people of faith, both made-rich and made-poor. Cross-cultural immersion trips across national borders are no longer necessary, as geographic borders are blurred by economic exploitation, violence, and persecution that force people to flee for their lives across borders formerly not traversed. *Borderlands* are no longer limited to the land, people, and customs around geographic national boundaries. *Borderlands* are spaces where cultures and contexts collide and re-form into ever-changing life-giving and life-denying patterns. *Borderlands* are spaces of constant change in which the possibilities of both good and evil are greatly exaggerated. One might find experiences in the borderlands as terrifying; while for another these encounters are life-giving. Carefully brokered and facilitated faith-based encounters across borders transformed my life and led me into the vocation of ministry, and continues to inform and reform me as I accompany others.

Being Church in the Borderlands entails thoughtful and respectful encounters across geographic, religious, social, legal, political, and linguistic borders of human origin. Being Church in the Borderlands requires courage, a commitment to subject-subject relationship and an openness to being transformed in and through relationship by all parties. Being Church in the Borderlands, especially between the people of power and privilege of RCUCC and *people-made-poor* and *power-less* – undocumented migrants and asylum-seekers – requires a commitment to examine the assumptions and privileges we carry into cross-border relationships. To be intentionally spiritually and scripturally based as Church in the borderlands means to both be Jesus and let others be Jesus to and with us. It means to acknowledge that we are both saint and sinner, but certainly not the Savior to anyone. Rather, we participate in the salvific action of God across the ages to processes of peace and justice, compassion and mercy, healing and transformation for all of God's people, especially those relegated to the margins of society.

CHAPTER 2: TWO CONGREGATIONS—WORLDS APART

Borders divide and separate people – assigning – usually – a more privileged space on one side and a less privileged space on the other. Throughout human history . . . people have drawn lines in the sand to tell others, “You can come this far, no farther.” Sometimes the lines are drawn by the weak in an attempt to protect themselves, but more often they are defined by the strong in order to guarantee themselves a greater measure of resources and power.

Jerry H Gill, *Borderlands Theology*

In 2016, I served as pastor for two congregations, separated by only thirty minutes but worlds apart from each other. The first, the Southwest Key detention center for undocumented and unaccompanied minors, is a transient congregation of children under 18 from the most impoverished, corrupt, and violent countries of Central America. The second, Rincon Congregational United Church of Christ (RCUCC), is a 250-member, progressive Christian church committed to extravagant welcome²¹ and ministry with the least, the last, and the lost.

Southwest Key Detention Center for Unaccompanied and Undocumented Minors

In the spring of 2016, I was contacted by the Southwest Key detention facility in Tucson about providing Protestant²² worship services in Spanish for the undocumented, unaccompanied minor children seeking asylum who were flooding the U.S.-Mexico border, some of whom were in protective detention in Tucson. Southwest Key is a private, non-profit organization contracted

²¹ “No matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here,” from the “Extravagant Welcome Brochure” of the United Church of Christ.

²² The Children at Southwest Key were divided into two groups, “Evangélicos” (Evangelicals) and Católicos (Catholics). No distinction was made for any other denomination or religion. As a Protestant pastor, I was considered to be “la Pastora Evangélica.”

by the Department of Homeland Security to provide a safe detention setting for children from birth to 17 years old. According to their website, “Southwest Key empowers youth and their families to make positive changes in their lives including at our 27 immigrant children's shelters in Texas, Arizona and California,” with 20,000 unaccompanied minors under the age of 18 in custody in their facilities at any given time.²³ Later in 2016, another detention facility that would house 1,000 children was built in the state of Texas to respond to the ever-increasing numbers of unaccompanied children from Central America. The Southwest Key facility in Tucson was designed to house up to 287 children.²⁴ At the end of 2016, the number of children from the Northern Triangle of Central America participating in the Protestant service exceeded capacity.

Every Wednesday I gathered up my clergy stole, MP3 recordings of praise music in Spanish, and copies of lectionary readings and words to the songs and traveled the 30 minutes from my eastside church to Southwest Key’s detention center on the west side of Tucson for unaccompanied, undocumented, immigrant children and youth. On my first visit, I passed the center several times before I realized that that it was a nondescript brown building close to the heart of town. No one would suspect that almost 300 children are housed there, children who have escaped the grinding poverty, violence, environmental devastation, and lack of opportunity to grow and thrive in their home countries in Central America. No one would guess that the former Howard Johnson Inn, later the bustling University of Arizona International Student

²³ “Immigrant Children's Shelters,” Southwest Key, accessed September 24, 2016, <http://www.swkey.org/programs/shelters/>.

²⁴ Perla Trevizo, “Shelter for Unaccompanied Minors "Homey" Tour Reveals,” *Arizona Daily Star*, December 8, 2015, accessed September 24, 2016, http://tucson.com/news/local/shelter-for-unaccompanied-minors-homey-tour-reveals/article_9ef8c729-05fe-516b-ba54-4e3cc21d8a8a.html.

Housing Complex, is now a Homeland Securities Center for the detention of almost 300 children crossing the U.S.-Mexico border unaccompanied and without proper immigration papers.

Once past the locked front doors, security check-in and guards, a member of my church and I were escorted to the large bright and colorful cafeteria where the children ate their meals and played board games in-between scheduled classes and other activities. Every Wednesday at 3:30 pm the cafeteria became a sanctuary. Tables disappeared and chairs were rearranged in rows of 30. In the early weeks we met in the gym which easily accommodated the original 30 boys but soon girls began to arrive too. As the numbers increased each week, we grew out of the gymnasium and into the largest space available, the cafeteria. The numbers of children and youth doubled and then doubled again until the cafeteria worship space was packed with children.

I was the only bilingual female Protestant minister to fill an expressed need and contractual requirement to lead “Evangelical” worship services. For some reason, most of the children come to the center from a variety of Protestant churches, mostly Pentecostal and others identifying as Evangelical and Christian, which, in Latin America, does not include Catholics. While these children had not experienced a female minister before, I never for a moment felt a lack of respect or engagement from them. The children and youth arrived for the Protestant worship service in small groups, chaperoned by two adult monitors - guards who watched, counted, and reported their movements 24 hours a day. They were shepherded into the long rows of chairs, while the monitors counted and recounted to make sure no one had gone missing. A few, mostly boys, arrived eager to engage, ready for the next adventure, whatever it might be. Most of the children looked deeply weary and lost. Others stared straight ahead and moved

robotically. A few hugged a teddy bear or other small stuffed animal. As the children filed into the make-shift worship space, I struggled with the dissonance between worship at Southwest Key and that of my church, RCUCC. It broke my heart to know that this small and protected space was just a brief reprieve from a life of suffering.

We prayed together in the custom of the indigenous people with whom I had ministered in southern Mexico. Prayers could last for ten minutes or more with all of us praying loudly in our own language, thanking God for all that God had done, and telling God what to do next. The expectation was that God listened and responded to these strong prayers, spoken individually but joined together as one keening voice. Most of the children hid their faces behind their open palms and sobbed their prayers. Were they reliving the dangerous circumstances of their journeys, missing their families, worried about being sent back to their countries of origin, which would mean almost certain death? I never knew. But I got a tiny glimpse when they came forward for a private prayer and blessing with me. Sometimes I couldn't understand their indigenous dialect, but their bodies, especially their eyes, spoke of great and prolonged suffering.

These were small children that looked years younger than their actual age due to malnutrition and they literally were worn thin by the journey. Despite the desperation of their circumstances, while they were at the shelter, they were treated like children, and played like children. Their unabashed joy at eating a good meal, coming to worship, playing soccer, and going to school was one of my most precious takeaways from my time with them. Another was their enthusiasm and depth of engagement in worship. They responded respectfully to me, their

tall “Gringa”²⁵ pastor. Unlike most children of the same age from the U.S., they participated fully and unabashedly without any prompting or fidgeting. They came hungry for a word to sustain them, for song to lift them, and for prayer to open a channel to God’s presence. When I asked for volunteers to read scripture, hands shot up, and those who read did so with pride and care. We sang songs I had found on the internet, religious songs in Spanish, but with an up tempo I knew the children would enjoy. After one time through, they had memorized and internalized the words. You could literally see the Word made Flesh in and through them as they sang full voiced and embodied.

Over time, the numbers of children increased from 300 or more, with a dramatic increase of girls. I was provided with big speakers and a microphone and found myself leading what I would call an “Evangelical-liberation theology worship service” to a packed house. The energy was spirited and we raised the roof with song. But more than the experience of bliss through song and prayer, the content of my reflections were relevant to their lives as migrant/strangers – unwelcome and “illegal.” The children resonated strongly with Jesus as migrant, Mary as unwed teenage mother, oppressed workers, and an unyielding interpretation of “law.” That was something new for them and they sat up and listened.

The girls though, were very shy at first, some only lifted their gaze from the floor after months of services with me. In my trips to the desert with the Tucson Samaritans, a group dedicated to saving migrant lives in the desert, I had come upon “trophy trees” where women

²⁵ The word Gringo/a derives from the U.S. invasion of Mexico City, in which the Mexicans are said to have chanted “Green – go home!” because the Marines’ uniforms were green. The term is since generally taken to mean a foreigner in Spain and Latin America.

and girls' panties were hung, signaling a threshold only crossed through rape. The girls at the Center told me they knew the probability of sexual assault and rape when they set out on their journey, and that those who could took precautionary measures to avoid pregnancy. Because girls were far outnumbered by men and boys on the journey north, some tried to disguise themselves as boys, to no avail.

Since I was limited to an hour, I tried to make eye contact with every child, especially girls, whose affect was much more downcast. For me, seeing them had to be blessing enough, and over time, I believe it did have a healing effect. We sang the eight to ten songs over and over because I hoped they would have an embodied memory of a time when they were happy and safe in God's house. The staff, who over time joined in worship with us, told me that they and the children sang the songs all day long and would burst into song over meals. Those "hymns", which, at an earlier time and context I would have eschewed as praise music, took us deep into the heart of God. The sense of consolation and relief and hope were palpable in the cafeteria-turned-sanctuary. Even the staff began to join in and approached me after worship for a private moment in prayer. The children also appreciated individual blessings at the end of worship, the only time when I could actually place a hand on a child. Protected from inappropriate physical contact, they were also isolated from healing touch. They formed a line out the door and waited patiently as each child came forward to be prayed over and blessed. These kids were starved for blessing.

The children's names have blurred for me, as sometimes they were either quickly transferred to another detention facility or placed with a family member who would sponsor them for asylum. I never knew what happened to these children, but the imprint their presence

left on my soul is strong. Several leaders emerged from within the groups, and I got to know them by their particular eagerness for worship or sadness during prayer. One moment they would be singing full force, to the point where their voices carried to all parts of the building, and the next moment their heads would be bowed, faces hidden behind hands or song sheets as they wept out their prayers. These were children who had not experienced happy and healthy childhoods. Quite the contrary, they came from the violence of poverty and guns, crossed a desert of almost unimaginable peril, to be placed, for at least a while, in a safe place where they would be fed, educated, treated for medical problems, and allowed to worship. For those who came to worship with me, the hour was a time to carry the past into the room and marry it to hope, albeit ever so small, of a better future, of a God who was present with them.

One young woman, whom I will call Berta, was eager from the beginning to engage with me through scripture and song. She volunteered to lead songs that only she and the other children knew. I would sit back and watch them recapture a bit of their past, something to cling to, even as they experienced a liberating theology and female pastor that they had never known before. Berta asked me for my Facebook address, but I wasn't allowed to share such personal information. She wrote down my name, which I hope she has retained as a remembrance that someone loved her here in this country where she and children like her were not welcomed. One day she disappeared as so many others did. I do not know to what or whom, but I trust that she was a Meriam or Hannah or Hagar or Mary or Anna from the Bible. She left me with the impression that she would find her way home, wherever that ended up being.

A young man, whom I will call Fernando, probably 15 years old - although he looked like he was much younger - always volunteered to read scripture and asked to keep the paper with the

reading on it. This, he said, he took to his room to meditate on and memorize. Fernando also led the children in songs from his Guatemalan church. While the children loved the songs I introduced to them, they showed a particular joy in singing their own traditional songs, sometimes in their Mayan languages. Fernando usually had a word to share about the readings. He told me later that he had been a pastor at his home church. Fernando had to be a minor to be here – a minor who was a pastor and had made the two-thousand-mile journey on the top of a train – no longer a child inside but still clearly with remnants of his former identity that anchored him in this new place.

My favorite time with the children, although I too often could not do it because of the number of children and lack of time, was when they came to me for private prayer and blessings. They lined up around the cafeteria-turned-sanctuary and came forward for a laying on of hands and prayer. I had never understood how priests in Chiapas could hear confession in a language they didn't understand and still be a helpful pastoral presence. But once I had touched and prayed with children who either didn't speak Spanish or whom I could not understand, I knew that this mattered. A bond was created. They were seen and blessed with respect and tenderness, and asked every week for more of that. The blessing of a total stranger, a female pastor, a Gringa, who cared about them and saw God in them was a very rare experience for these children in transit in one of the worst journeys a child can experience. I can still feel those moments. They were a blessing for me as well.

Most Wednesdays there were too many children and too little time to bless all of them, even if I had a helper or two from church. Still, taking a note from Jesus' encounter with the hemorrhaging woman, I blessed the children with my eyes when I could not actually touch them.

I encouraged RCUCC members who accompanied me to really *see* each child and be an instrument of God's love, blessing them through *seeing* them, rather than touching them. The girls in particular, responded well to being *seen*, as they had come from a culture of *machismo*²⁶ in which girls and women were not truly *seen* as subjects of their own lives. They stood taller, lifted their head and eyes, and held my gaze more with each successive week's worship.

We learned that these children were sent to the center within 24 hours of apprehension by Border Patrol and remained in custody between a few days and several months while their immigration status was being negotiated. The staff of Southwest Key worked to find family members in the U.S. who could take in these unaccompanied minor children. Most family members in the U.S. who agreed to be sponsors were, themselves, also undocumented, which makes sponsoring a child for asylum very precarious for everyone involved. Even if a child is placed with a family member in the U.S., their stay in the U.S. is not guaranteed. Many would be returned home where their families would face a huge debt for their journey, and the same or worse violent conditions from which they had fled.

Many of these children had left their lives and loved ones behind, having traveled thousands of miles alone from their home countries in Central America, and hanging onto the tops and sides of freight trains called *La Bestia* (The Beast).²⁷ Illegal travel aboard *La Bestia* is controlled by gangs notorious for their brutality. The children's journeys are extremely

²⁶ Machismo connotes exaggerated masculinity, virility, male chauvinism.

²⁷ For a better understanding of children's journey aboard *la Bestia*, see Sonia Nazario, *Enrique's Journey : The True Story of a Boy Determined to Reunite with His Mother* (New York: Delacorte Press, 2013).

dangerous, as human smugglers, Mexican and U.S. vigilante groups, ranchers, and local law and immigration enforcement officers prey upon them. If these vulnerable kids don't find handholds along the sides or tops of trains, they make the trip north packed into buses and vans.²⁸ The drivers are known to stop abruptly to sell and transfer their human "load" to another driver, who sometimes has different designs on their cargo than was originally intended. Many children make the last 60 miles across the perilous Sonoran Desert on foot. An adult family member accompanies a few, but most of the unaccompanied children come alone and join with a group of adults and a *coyote*, human smuggler. That they make it to the shelter at all is something of a miracle. If they make it, most take weeks to heal their feet from infected blisters.

Rincon Congregational United Church of Christ

RCUCC is located in Southern Arizona, fifty miles north of the border with Mexico in the city of Tucson. Tucson's metropolitan area population is just over 980 thousand people. We are a part of Arizona's Sonoran Desert, surrounded by multiple mountain ranges that provide spectacular views, relief from the extreme desert temperatures, an abundance of wildlife, hiking and biking trails, public parks, and scenic colonial and Native American architecture. As home to the University of Arizona, we have many student-friendly vintage shops, nightclubs and restaurants on Fourth Avenue near the campus. It is often said that Tucson is to Phoenix as Austin is to Houston. Tucson is smaller, cooler, less expensive, more liberal-to-progressive, with greater cultural diversity, gastronomic adventures, and excellent theaters, museums, and galleries for its size.

²⁸ Oscar Martinez, *The Beast: Riding the Rails and Dodging the Narcos on the Migrant Trail*, ed. Kindle (New York: Verso, 2014).

Arizona has a long history of sharp divisions politically and culturally, with its peoples and its legislature. Tensions over the strong application of Manifest Destiny of the U.S., the violent acquisition of major Mexican territories, and the crushing “Trail of Tears” exacted against the Native American populations continue to inform policy and practice in the area today. The dominant body politic of Arizona in the present day is ultra conservative, exclusive, anti-education, anti-immigrant, pro-border security and military, and White Supremacist. Outsiders have referred to Arizona as the “state of dry hate” because of its reactionary, repressive, and reductive politics.

Founded in 1957 at the far limits of Tucson’s eastern border, RCUCC came into being at the same time the UCC denomination was formed. The historic moment of Congregational, Evangelical, Christian, and Reformed Churches coming together to be church under the umbrella of the United Church of Christ marked a commitment to pluralism and ecumenism that resounded in the new Rincon Congregational United Church of Christ. The combination of English Puritanism, American frontier revivalism, Swiss and German Reformed private piety and plain liturgy made for an engaged and engaging experience of church. Committed to both the practice of *autonomy* - so important to our Congregational-Christian roots, and *covenant* - from our Evangelical-Reformed predecessors, the new church family found strength in the tension between the two.

This understanding of the autonomy of local churches, and a covenantal commitment to stay in relationship and conversation have been a hallmark of RCUCC’s 65 years of being church. While church members have disagreed and struggled over the issues of wars in Vietnam and the Middle East, sexual orientation and gender identity, immigration, and women’s

reproductive health, church leadership has steered through these conflicts to an ever more progressive understanding of what it means to be the church together.

RCUCC remembers, celebrates, and lives out of our combined histories of inclusion, welcome, and justice. Congregationalists actively opposed slavery, founded the first public schools, and ordained the first African American Christian minister. It was the first Christian denomination to name racism as a sin, ordained the first American woman and the first openly gay man to Christian ministry, and, in 1985, adopted an Open and Affirming resolution to include and celebrate LGBTQ members in all areas of ministry.

From its inception in October 1957, RCUCC was envisioned as a church that offered a progressive approach to religion and spirituality. By that we mean that we take the Bible seriously, but not literally. We don't claim to have all the answers but embrace the questions. We are a non-doctrinal church, gathered around a generous statement of faith but open to emerging theologies and understandings of church. Worship, faith development programs, community gatherings, ministry partnerships, community outreach, and stewardship of resources reflect a commitment to inter-religious and ecumenical relationships. At RCUCC every Sunday, we repeat the UCC slogan, "No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here." We seek to love the world and to embrace others as Jesus did. Everyone is invited into full membership regardless of age, race, ethnic origin or worldly condition. We are an Open and Affirming congregation, accepting and valuing people regardless of gender identity or sexual orientation. We also are a Just Peace Church, committed to naming and boldly proclaiming a public identity as a justice-doing, peace-seeking church. Our history demonstrates our love of art and music, our compassion for each other and the members of the wider

community, our desire to fight for social justice and our willingness to support each other on our spiritual journeys.

RCUCC is a church in the borderlands of the U.S. and Mexico, holding all the ancient conflicts of this geographic and historical context, yet daring to go beyond the centers of conservative and fundamentalist religious, political, economic, and military power, to stand among those who are adversely affected by policies and practices of exclusion, discrimination, and domination. An offshoot of the First Congregational Church of Tucson, RCUCC was purposely situated on the farthest eastern corner of Tucson between the city and the surrounding desert. The name “Rincon” is Spanish for “corner” – which denotes its geographic location in “the corner” of in the city. The Rincon Mountains are just east of the church. While development rapidly enveloped our church, RCUCC has maintained a strong sense of being a church in ministry and mission in the borderlands, breaking down walls of ignorance and prejudice, bringing people together around a table open to all, and intentionally building bridges of connection between people and place.

When the church was first built in 1957, the surrounding area was at the outskirts of the city in the middle of a vast and beautiful high-desert valley. Now in 2017 the city has encroached on and enveloped our church and we find ourselves at the hub of commercial, residential, military, and faith communities. Our demographics have changed somewhat to include many non-traditional families, more single/divorced, and widowed (especially retired) adults, and more people with differing physical and mental abilities. While the racial makeup of our church is still predominantly White, it is reflective of the surrounding neighborhood.

Throughout the past sixty years, RCUCC has drawn from a predominantly strong middle and upper-middle class, college-educated, nuclear-family demographic. RCUCC includes strong representations of active and retired school teachers, principals and university professors, as well as medical doctors and nurses. As a result, RCUCC has always had strong educational and health and wellbeing related foci, with a liberal to progressive ideology and theology, and egalitarian style of leadership.

Most RCUCC members and visitors would say that our commitment to social justice is a major reason for choosing our church. In addition to hands-on ministry opportunities, ministry with the “weakest, poorest, and most abused” in our frontier context also includes education (study groups, workshops, conferences) and advocacy (protests, community hearings, rallies). Primary mission partnerships include ministries with people of all ages who are homeless, differently-documented, mentally ill, minority gender identity and sexual orientation, imprisoned, and economically disadvantaged.

In keeping with our denominational histories, from RCUCC’s inception, our church has lived into the prophet Isaiah’s declaration that God is doing a new thing, by going beyond established borders to bring life to the desert, both literally and figuratively.²⁹ The ongoing mission and vision of our church are best expressed in the following “**Be the Church**” banners that hang in the chancel of both worship spaces:

²⁹ Isaiah 43:19: “Look, I am doing something new! Now it springs forth—can’t you see it? I’m making a road in the desert and setting rivers to flow in the wasteland.”



—UCC Resources, Be The Church

Few of our members who helped found the new church are still alive.³⁰ Mary Brown, a Spanish teacher at the University of Arizona, taught Spanish to church members and led the church to become a Just Peace Church in the UCC. Ann and Dick Monroe taught children through to college and helped lead the church to become an Open and Affirming congregation. Two public school teachers, Ron and Norma Waller, had a horse and cattle ranch a few hours away, and for years they invited anyone who wanted to come to visit them on weekends. Children and adults learned to ride horses and thrived on their time sitting around campfires. Church was formed on the land surrounding Tucson as much as it was on the church campus. Maybe more. The sense of community held through the Vietnam war, and the civil rights, peace, and women's movements.

Those roots in public and Christian education still run deep in the congregation. The Wallers are in their eighties but still serve on church ministry teams. Norma served on my Lay Advisory Committee. Judy Frasier's pastor-husband Cal recently died, but she is still an active

³⁰ Not their actual names.

member of the League of Women Voters and helps to schedule volunteers for our Hospitality program. Anne and Gordon Gunther still sing in the choir and Anne organizes our Congregational Life activities. Jean Bailey and her daughter, Pam Spires, carry their early civil rights activism into the post Trump era, encouraging church members to show up for pickets and protests as part of their faith practice. David Stump, a former executive at one of the big armament manufacturers, participated in two of this project's immersion experiences. Several of our early teenaged children act as Communion ministers with me, often saying the words over communion as they have understood them. The same children who are talented singers, harpists, and pianists organized and presented a benefit concert for our Hospitality program that raised over \$1,500. Our colorful and inspiring banners in both worship spaces remind us that the work and play and prayer of ministry to **Be the Church** is a life-long practice.

Hearts Broken Open

For the first few months of services at Southwest Key, a RCUCC member accompanied me on each visit. Most of those who accompanied me did not speak Spanish, so their understanding and experience of the worship service and the children's lived realities was limited. Yet I could see that they too were engaged and moved by this experience of church. RCUCC volunteers' eyes and hearts opened to these children and we carried stories of our time together back to our families and friends, and to the church.

In October of 2016, after months of accompaniment, I was pulled aside by a Southwest Key staff member before one worship service and told that, due to the increased anti-refugee and migrant rhetoric of the presidential campaign, security of the facility was increasing. I would be

the only RCUCC representative who would be allowed access with the children. Anyone else would have to undergo thorough security screening, which could take months to complete. While I supplied a list of those who wanted to apply for security clearance, weeks and months passed with no action taken by the Center to initiate the process. While members were frustrated by not being able to accompany me, they understood the need to safeguard the children's safety.

Yet our simply sharing stories about the children was sadly insufficient for members of RCUCC to develop an ongoing relationship and discern next steps in accompaniment and ministry with these children. Our members wanted to help asylum-seeking children in detention but due to members' limited access at the Center, it seemed the only way we could help was through my continued witness to the children's presence among us, and charitable help. One Christmas, we raised \$2,000 for gifts for the children that Southwest Key staff chose. Each child received a few small gifts on Christmas morning. A RCUCC member organized a cap knitting campaign, and six RCUCC members distributed 300 cheerful hand knit caps to the eagerly extended hands of the children. As we sang Christmas songs, they tossed caps across the room to exchange for one they liked more, until each of the children seemed content with what they had on their heads. For weeks afterward, they wore their caps to worship. I imagine some of them, wherever they are, still wearing a reminder that someone cared for them that Christmas day.

Gradually, there came to be a stirring at church by members who wanted to do something that linked them more closely with the children. Our limited connection with and through the children was to be the window through which RCUCC members would encounter the wider world from which these children came. We determined that we could perhaps best serve these

particular children by applying ourselves to the broader issues of Central American migrants and refugees seeking asylum in the U.S. and discerning how God was calling our church to Be the Church with them. We needed to know more about unaccompanied, undocumented children from Central America who migrate and seek asylum in the U.S., why they were forced to leave their countries, family, friends, churches, culture and identity as someone who belonged, behind them. What impact did their journey across borders, so fraught with danger, have on their bodies, minds, and spirits? How have their identities and faith changed upon arrival and detention in the U.S.? How might we, as church, best accompany these children on their journey?

My involvement as pastor to the children at Southwest Key ended a year after it started. The political response to immigration in general, and specifically to unaccompanied undocumented minors began to slow to a trickle, while simultaneously the construction of larger detention centers opened to house larger numbers of children. Children were sent from Southwest Key to be warehoused in these larger facilities while their asylum processes ground to a halt. Many children were ultimately returned to the violent conditions from which they had fled but were further burdened with the debt incurred through their migration. I can only imagine their fate.

For those who remained while I was there, I began to see children who had been in the system for so long that they had lost all hope and had become rebellious or hopeless. In every worship service there were a few boys who caused disruption. I felt increasingly stressed having to prepare and celebrate worship with upwards of 300 children. One day, I took hold of a boy's arm who was being very disrespectful and disruptive. I knew I had reached my limits of patience

and time. I gave my notice in writing and never heard back from management. I did not get to say goodbye to the children, but by this time, they had become all too accustomed to losing people without being able to say goodbye.

These children left their imprints on the souls of RCUCC members and friends who accompanied them. They were and are still the impetus behind the church's discernment regarding ongoing ministry and mission with migrants and refugees. Hopefully, we also imprinted on their souls and for a while, were able to be stand-ins for the parents and pastors they had left behind. That is clearly what we do in our Christian faith, hand off ministry to others who will follow, trusting that God is present, that seeds of Good News have been planted in all who came to worship as one holy church.

CHAPTER 3: BORDERLAND THEOLOGY

Now there was a woman who had suffered from hemorrhages for twelve years; after long and painful treatment from various doctors, she had spent all she had without getting better—in fact, she was getting worse. She had heard about Jesus, and she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak. “If I can touch even the hem,” she had told herself, “I will be well again.” Immediately the flow of blood dried up, and she felt in her body that she was healed of her affliction. Immediately aware that healing power had gone out from him, Jesus turned to the crowd and said, “Who touched my clothes?” The disciples said, “You see how the crowd is pressing you and yet you say, ‘Who touched me?’” But Jesus continued to look around to see who had done it. Then the woman came forward, frightened and trembling because she knew what had happened to her, and she fell at Jesus’ feet and told him the whole truth. “My daughter,” Jesus said, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace and be free of your affliction.”

— Mark 5: 25-34

The gospels reveal many stories of Jesus’ *kindom*-building³⁵ across borders. He travels throughout Galilee and Samaria, crossing the Sea of Galilee, back and forth many times, weaving together people of diverse backgrounds, always seeing, hearing, touching, healing, teaching and preaching, always restoring individuals to their full God-given potential in and through community, always pushing against Roman and Jewish rule that divided God’s people between *us* and *them*, *inside* and *outside*. As Jesus dared to question and cross geographical as well as social, economic, religious, and political borders, he gathered crowds who were drawn to his all-inclusive, *radical welcome* ministry of healing and transformation.

Our stories of Jesus’ life and ministry always reveal him crossing borders: between rich and poor, clean and unclean, Jew and Gentile, women and men, sane and driven-crazy, *his* people and *those* people. Jesus was always finding himself on the margins with people who had been cast off and out and down. Border activists have cited this border-crossing Jesus as justification for churches’ advocacy of civil disobedience against unjust immigration laws, as

well as inspiration for venturing out into the desert surrounding Tucson and across geographic borders to the south. There continues to be an effort to know and be in ministry with our neighbors to the south who are forced by economic, social, political and environmental hardship to leave their homes and search for life elsewhere.

While I agree with this interpretation of Jesus' ministry, it is important to acknowledge moments in our faith story when others exercised their own agency, crossing geographic, cultural, and religious borders in seeking *him* out, reaching and calling out to *him*, even touching *him*.³¹ The story of the hemorrhaging woman in Mark's gospel is one such story. *She*, who has suffered the debilitating effects of a twelve-year hemorrhage, has the courage (or desperation) to seek Jesus out, coming up behind him and touching the hem of his cloak. We can't know what she expected, just that she *acted* on her faith.

Jesus, realizing power had gone out from him, then sought out the unnamed woman. She made the next move, revealing herself to him, whereupon he said, "*Your* faith has healed you."³² Just so, she took initiative in her own salvation of body and soul. Jesus acknowledged the woman's agency in her own healing, but the healing took place in an exchange of power between the two. He, a male, a Jew and a Rabbi, was a person of considerable power and privilege, where the unnamed woman was considered ritually unclean, probably childless and thus even worth-less in her culture, sick in body and spirit, and utterly alone. To many she was a pariah.

³¹ See stories of the man from Gerasene country (Mk 5:1-17, Lk 8:26-37), the Syrophenician woman (Mk 15: 21-28, Mt 15: 21-28), and the tax collector, Zacchaeus (Lk 19:1-10).

³² Italics for emphasis are mine.

Yet her desperation and tenacity to be whole compelled her to act far beyond established boundaries of ordinary social patterns of the ancient Middle East.

As a missionary with the United Church of Christ's Common Global Ministries, in partnership with the Catholic Diocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico, I met many women whose lives paralleled the unidentified woman from Mark's gospel: frail and thin; soaked in sadness but carrying on with the necessary daily chores of sweeping the dirt floor; caring for the meager livestock; shucking dry corn kernels from their hardened cobs; and gathering loads of firewood on their backs to be used for cooking weak coffee, tortillas and beans. She attends weekly bible study with other women in her small community, each year increasingly frail and tentative about getting close to anyone who would be bothered by her smell. After years of suffering, her husband takes her to a local *curandero/a*³³ serving the rural indigenous community, who treats her for snake bite or a curse put on her by a jealous relative. But there is no snake, no curse – just the slow loss of blood that drains her of her life force, reducing her year by year to almost nothing.

She looks seventy but is only thirty-two. She had one child before she lost the next and the next due to lack of sanitation and medical care. Her only child departs for the north as soon as he graduates from primary school. He follows a promise for a better future *-para salir adelante*. He is just a child, sent north to do a man's job: send money home so his family can survive. She is left alone as she tries and tries again to have another child, to no avail. She has bled too much for too long. She is not seen or heard by members of her own community. There

³³ A traditional native healer who uses ancient healing practices passed down through ancestors.

appears to be no remedy to her suffering. But she does not give up. She reaches across borders to access power not available to her alone. She touches hearts and minds with her story of courage and willingness to be made whole. Her bleeding stops and she is restored once again to the fullness of life in community, perhaps even helping other women who seek reproductive health.

The experience of the hemorrhaging woman is endemic in developing countries, but also resonates in and through the unremitting and prolonged “hemorrhaging” of countries of the global south of their most precious life force, their children. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees Agency’s 2016 report brings the metaphor of the hemorrhaging woman to greater clarity, revealing migration patterns from the global south to the global north with startling statistics: 65.3 million people around the world have been displaced from their homes worldwide; among them are 21.3 million refugees; and over half of these are children under 18 years of age.³⁴ Central American countries, especially those of the Northern Triangle – Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras – are hemorrhaging their vital life force through the migration of their citizens who flee north to Mexico and the United States. But just as the hemorrhaging of the woman in Mark’s gospel was not *her* problem alone to resolve, just as she reached out to Jesus to be healed, and just as Jesus shared his power with her, which when shared, returned her to health and her God-given potential, the church today is called to respond when we are touched by suffering, to share power in order to bring about healing, and walk

³⁴ United Nations High Commission for Refugees Agency, “Figures at a Glance,” accessed October 5, 2016, <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html>.

together toward the *kingdom* of God. Women's reproductive health, especially among impoverished and indigenous women, is a low priority in developing countries.

I also resonate with the story of the woman with a 12-year hemorrhage who approached Jesus and courageously touched the hem of his garment. I went in search of Jesus when I was but a child and learned early on that I would find Jesus outside the walls of church more consistently than in. I found and continue to find Jesus outside the institutions of church and society, on the road to Jerusalem, traversing territories where difference and dissonance meet and hope is born in the midst of the struggle. I hear his words, "*Your faith has saved you; go in peace and be free of your affliction*" and know this to be true in my own life. I have reached out time and time again – transgressing social, ideological, theological, and trans-national borders has indeed saved me from a narrow life, constrained by biases. I have come to trust in my own sense of agency and Jesus' steady covenant to always show up to see, meet, and heal me. Borders, when transcended by human and Divine intervention, expand our understanding of who and whose we are and how we are called together to heal our world.

The story of the woman with the twelve-year hemorrhage is an important reminder to Christians that Jesus' ministry was one of relationship, connection, and shared power across borders of difference and dissonance. In a patriarchal culture, a woman would never achieve the level of power that Jesus had, but that does not mean she is powerless. Rather, she becomes an agent for positive social change, just as the women from Central America are agents for positive social change toward the relocation and reunification of their families. They too take great risks to reach across social and geographic borders. Their faith propels them forward to touch the hem of Jesus' garment, hoping for the literal salvation for their children. Church, as the hands and

feet, body and breath of Christ, incarnate in the world is called to witness the courage and commitment of refugee and migrant families, and participate in God's saving grace through ministries of accompaniment.

At Rincon, we hear the cries of the woman through news reports, but how do we gain relational proximity and trust in order to share our power with one another? More specifically how can Rincon members see and respond to the women as they reach out to their neighbors in the north, many of whom are mothers too? How do we find our way to real life and soul-saving ministry with the mothers and children of the hemorrhaging south? How might power be shared between two communities "worlds apart"? In our particular context as people of faith and citizens of the United States, this means being willing to walk with our neighbors from the south who seek refuge and restoration in our country. Marie Dennis et. al challenge people of faith in the north, saying:

"Our response might be best summed up by the word 'accompaniment:' to deviate from our pathway for a while (and then forever), by walking with them on the margins, to be with them, to let go... [W]e, who with Francis once saw the poor only as the "other," the feared one, the object of dread, pity and then charity, can, as individuals and societies, experience a profound and ongoing transformation of body, mind, and spirit. Slowly, our centers of gravity move outside of ourselves and we find ourselves dancing... with friends in unknown places and with great joy."³⁵

³⁵ Marie Dennis, *St. Francis and the Foolishness of God* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993), 21.

But crossing geographic, ideological, and legal borders is loaded with risk. Immigration has always been a tender and complex topic in the U.S. Vigilante groups, aggressive Border Patrol agents, hunters, and ranchers respond aggressively to humanitarian aid on the migrant trails, shooting holes in and draining water tanks, slashing water jugs, and harassing humanitarian aid volunteers.

Gloria Anzaldúa, an American scholar of Chicana culture, feminist and queer theory writes from the perspective of her life in the borderlands between the U.S. and Mexico:

The U.S.-Mexican border es una herida abierta [an open wound] where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country — a border culture. Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants.³⁶

Her critique is a stinging rebuke of borders as strategies of colonization employed by Europeans in the Americas, and later adopted by both the U.S. and Mexico to determine who and what belongs to whom, and to create a division between those whose rights and benefits are protected under the law of the land and those who are not. Anzaldúa gives witness to her own experience of social and cultural marginalization in the borderlands. Her works are beacons of light for oppressed and oppressor who wish to open the wound so that it might heal. In *This Bridge We Call Home* she writes:

³⁶ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands: The New Mestiza = La Frontera*, First edition. ed. (San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987). (San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Books, 2012), 25.

But there are no safe spaces. 'Home' can be unsafe and dangerous because it bears the likelihood of intimacy and thus thinner boundaries. Staying 'home' and not venturing out from our group comes from woundedness, and stagnates our growth. To bridge means loosening our borders, not closing off to others. Bridging is the work of opening the gate to the stranger, within and without.³⁷

Organizations in Tucson such as *No More Deaths* (NMD) and the *Samaritans* “open the gate to the stranger” bridging realities between north and south on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border. For those from the U.S. who wish to see and understand the migrants’ arduous journey north, these groups organize “searches” into the desert surrounding Tucson. Every day, at least two vehicles with four volunteers apiece travel by car and on foot, deep into the desert looking for people who have been lost or left behind by their *coyote*/smugglers. Each search vehicle carries a Spanish-speaker, medical personnel and two other volunteers who drive and walk known paths of migration. This experience is open to anyone who is willing to get up early and spend half a day in what is often a futile attempt to find the proverbial needle in a haystack.

Before I served a local congregation, I spent one Sunday a month with other *Samaritans*, wearing my clergy collar and a bright red Samaritans T-shirt, walking with my group and calling out, “Tenemos agua, medicina, comida. Somos amigos *Samaritanos*. Que no tengan miedo!!” (We have water, medicine, food. We are Samaritan friends. Don’t be afraid!) Our actions are a small attempt to respond to Isaiah’s call to “give yourself to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted.” In doing so, we come face to face with abject human suffering and the almost unimaginable courage and determination of those whom we seek to assist and accompany. Perhaps we cannot repair broken walls and restore ruined neighborhoods, but we can create

³⁷ Gloria Anzaldúa and AnaLouise Keating, *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation* (New York: Routledge, 2002). 3.

relationships that sustain and nurture hope in these borderlands, hope in the life-giving and saving ways of Jesus. People, like the hemorrhaging woman, sought him out and he saw and attended them like no one else did. Luke's gospel describes his first sermon after his baptism and wilderness experience, as he unrolled the scroll of the book of Isaiah and read from it, paraphrasing the prophet's words:

The spirit of our God is upon me:
because the most-high has anointed me
to bring Good news to those who are poor.
God has sent me to proclaim liberty to those held captive,
recovery of sight to those who are blind,
and release to those in prison—
To proclaim the year of our God's favor.”

— Luke 4:18

The Church is called to be God's Good News, not merely words, but actions that save lives and souls, ours included. How do we find our way to real life and soul-saving ministry with the mothers and children of the hemorrhaging south?

CHAPTER 4: THE HEMORRHAGING SOUTH

La Ruta de las Mujeres: The Women's Path

*I walk the path that you took
hours or days ago.
Stones and slope and thorns
threaten each step with
danger.*

*I see where you slept
under the mesquite tree
home to spiders, snakes, ants -
familiar to coyotes, Gila monsters,
God knows what.*

*A piece of plastic,
grass woven into the branches
for shade against the merciless sun,
a tuna can, toothbrush,
tortilla cloth, used bus ticket -
all part of your story,
your life lost in this desert.*

*Nearby a tiny silver spoon
engraved, a love letter,
your bible, a pair of panties,
birth control pills, breast cancer medicine,
a baby bottle, diapers,
one chancla,*

*perfume bottle, a pair of pants with
a name and number written in the
inseam.*

*O, what you leave behind
haunts me*

*I know you
Sister, mother, friend,
Lover, aunt.*

*Some day
we will all be held
accountable for
your suffering, your loss.*

*Someday, we will
celebrate your courage,
your story, making
your way to the Promised Land.*

*Some day we will name this Exodus
and thank God that
some of you made it
across.*

■ By Rev. Delle McCormick for Conspirando Magazine, 2008, Chile

In the summer of 2014, we began hearing in Tucson news about a dramatic upsurge in the numbers of Guatemalan mothers with small children, even children traveling alone who were apprehended and detained at the nearby U.S.-Mexico border. Nearby detention facilities, especially private prisons, were filled with undocumented migrant men who were awaiting deportation or serving up to six months in prison before deportation, but there were no facilities for women and children. Despite warnings of a human “hemorrhage” from Central American countries, such as El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, plagued by increasing homicides and political and mob-related violence, virtually no preparation was made to receive and care for the women and children affected by this massive immigration crisis. Churches and nonprofits in Tucson quickly began to mobilize to provide humanitarian aid and safe harbor for this sudden flood of women and children.

That summer more than 70,000 children from Central America arrived at the U.S - Mexico border seeking refuge from extreme poverty, governmental corruption, and gang violence.³⁸ The highest homicide rate in the world is in Honduras where incidents of murders have increased for women and girls by 346% since 2005, and by 292% for men and boys. Honduras led the way in “illegal entry” into Mexico, with Guatemala close behind.³⁹ At the border just south of Tucson however, it is thought that more Guatemalan women and children cross the U.S.-Mexico border than Hondurans because of the extreme poverty, malnutrition, and

³⁸ Laura Weiss, “Central American Refugees Struggle for Protection in Southern Mexico,” North America Congress on Latin America. accessed November 24, 2016. <https://nacla.org/news/2016/09/19/central-american-refugees-struggle-protection-southern-mexico>

³⁹ "Three Myths About Central American Migration to the United States," WOLA and Jesuit Conference, accessed 3.16.17, 2017. <https://www.wola.org/analysis/three-myths-about-central-american-migration-to-the-united-states/>.

general poor health of Honduran migrants as they start their journey, as well as the increased distance they must traverse to get here.

Other factors contributed to the deterioration of living conditions in Mexico and Central America. The 2005 Plan Puebla Panama (or PPP), established infrastructure to deter human migration from the Panama Canal through Central Mexico. The PPP, also called the Mesoamerica Integration and Development Project was initiated to “develop” the region and facilitate movement of goods and services. The Plan, while providing much-needed jobs in *maquiladoras* (factories) to impoverished indigenous populations whose economic instability had caused them to leave their land and migrate to large cities or *maquiladora* zones in order to survive. However, once people moved off their land in order to work in the maquiladoras, they lost the ability to feed themselves and live in community. Turnover was high due to poor working and health conditions and long hours. Yet when they left the *maquiladora*, there was no place for them to go back to; their only option was to continue to migrate, which meant they were forced to leave their families behind with grandparents who did not have the resources to care for the children. One Mexican business video acquired by immigration activists promoting the movement of manufacturing to Mexico, actually used the term *gente desechable* (disposable people) for the ready availability to maquiladoras of the young impoverished, easily expendable, indigenous labor force.

The PPP drew native peoples off of communal land that is rich in resources, and contributed to the rapid debilitation (or *desencarnacion*, literally, dis-embodiment) of the young workforce due to dangerous working conditions, low wages, and long hours. Maquiladoras mostly employed a young, female labor force for their good hand-eye coordination for

production lines. In very short time and before they ever gained health insurance benefits, these workers developed chronic illnesses which prevented them from working and caused irreparable harm to their bodies and spirits. I saw direct results from the PPP in the daily lives of the people with whom I served in the Catholic Dioceses of San Cristóbal de las Casas Chiapas, Mexico and migrants from Central America whom I met on their way north. These included chronic health problems caused by hard labor, poverty, and/or stress; loss of “mom and pop” businesses; forced migration of head of households, leaving their children to the care of ill-equipped grandparents, increased human trafficking and prostitution, and homelessness. While the PPP is well known, even by impoverished peoples in Latin America, few people from the U.S. whom I have led on delegations to that region had previous knowledge of it or its causative effects on migration.

The September, 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the U.S. dramatically intensified security on the U.S.-Mexico border. In response to the attacks, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) swallowed up Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture Administration (USDA); DHS reorganized these and nearly 20 other agencies, creating 10,000 new jobs for border agents in 2004 alone.⁴⁰ Additionally, new detection technologies and detention centers were quickly built to stop Central American migrant and asylum-seekers before they reached the U.S.- Mexico border. The militarization prior to the 9/11 attacks is now commonplace throughout Mexico, with multiple sophisticated military checkpoints within Mexico to deter the flow of human and drug traffic into the U.S.

⁴⁰ Andrew Becker, "Immigration Timeline," Frontline, accessed August 22, 2017. <http://www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/mexico704/history/timeline.html>.

Militarization of the borders between Mexico and Guatemala, Mexico and the U.S., and the entirety of Mexico in between has created great suffering and many deaths along the way, forcing migrants to take the long and perilous routes around border walls and other border security infrastructure. “Border security” has meant anything but safety to those forced to navigate the many layers of paramilitary groups, vigilante groups, human traffickers, security technology, border patrol and real and virtual walls. De la Torre notes:

“The border has become a militarized zone where constitutional guarantees and international law as are routinely ignored. Our efforts to secure the southern border results in the institutionalization of human and civil rights violations evident by increasing migrant deaths, along with corrupting influence upon under-trained law enforcement officers.”⁴¹

Tragically, as border security increased so did migrants’ deaths in the Sonoran Desert south of Tucson. Those forced to flee their homes because of fear for their lives and livelihoods faced even greater threats to their safety on their journey north.

Border security quickly became big business as international companies vied for lucrative contracts to provide advanced technologies to provide deterrence, detection, and apprehension. Simultaneously, border communities quickly capitalized on migrants’ needs for transportation, guides (*coyotes*), supplies, and cheap motel rooms. The price of items necessary for surviving the journey across borders, especially water, tortillas, and backpacks, skyrocketed. Organized and disorganized crime, including gangs, paramilitary, vigilante groups, and human traffickers quickly discovered skyrocketing financial gains from the human diaspora north to the U.S. The

⁴¹ Miguel De la Torre, *The U.S. Immigration Crisis: Towards and Ethics of Place* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books: Kindle Edition, 2016). 368.

burgeoning economy created to profit from illegal immigration continues to grow today making the steady hemorrhage of people from south to north increasingly impossible to stop.

A 2010 UNICEF newsletter estimated that six million people from Latin America and the Caribbean had migrated within the region and some 25 million had migrated to the United States and Europe.⁴² The Migration Policy Institute estimates that between 2013 and 2014 alone, the numbers of unaccompanied minors from Central America who crossed the border into the U.S. increased by 90%.⁴³ Projected numbers for 2015 of Central American children and families apprehended at the U.S.-Mexico border could exceed the previous year's high of 69,000 minors and 68,000 families.⁴⁴

For those who live in the borderlands of Arizona and Sonora, Mexico, we cannot help but see and hear and know of the plight of our neighbors to the south. What used to be pristine thoroughfares through the Sonoran Desert and mountains south of Tucson are now a myriad of trails, littered with the stuff of people's lives, including their bones. Walking these trails in search of migrants who have become sick, hurt, or lost, as a volunteer with the Tucson Samaritans, I witnessed decaying bodies, including a twelve-year-old girl who died of thirst and

⁴² Rut Feuk, Nadine Perrault, and Enrique Delamónica, "Children and International Migration in Latin America and the Caribbean," *Challenges*, 2010. [http://www.unicef.org/lac/challenges-11-cepal-unicef\(1\).pdf](http://www.unicef.org/lac/challenges-11-cepal-unicef(1).pdf).

⁴³ "Rising Child Migration to the United States," Migration Policy Institute, Accessed July 3, 2017. <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/about/contact-and-directions>.

⁴⁴ Muzaffar Chisti and Faye Hipsman, "Increased Central American Migration to the United States May Prove an Enduring Phenomenon," Accessed July 2, 2017. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/increased-central-american-migration-united-states-may-prove-enduring-phenomenon>.

heat stroke just one mile from a road that led to a hospital. I have heard horror stories of abuse, extortion, and other dangers in making this perilous journey north. The few migrants and asylum-seekers who get through these barriers are exhausted and deeply wounded in mind, body and spirit. One migrant whom we assisted in the desert told us, “You would have to be either crazy or in the worst of life’s circumstances to make the journey.” He continued, “This isn’t a decision or a choice; it’s an absolute necessity for survival. But so many of us do not survive, and many others of us experience damage beyond repair to our bodies and spirits.”

CHAPTER 5: PREPARING A WAY THROUGH THE DESERT

Jesus tells us that we are called to follow him, in breaking down all earthly divisions that get in the way of carrying out his instructions. Sure, it's impossible to feed five thousand people, make a deaf man hear, bring a dead girl to life, as long as you obey human rules. So do it God's way instead, Jesus teaches, *Say yes. Jump right in. Come and see. Embrace the wrong people. Don't idolize religion. Have mercy.*

— Sara Miles, *Jesus Freak: Feeding, Healing, Raising the Dead*

On May 1, 2013 I was called as Senior Pastor for RCUCC. I came to RCUCC after eight years of ministry in Mexico and eight in the borderlands between Arizona and Sonora, Mexico. For five years prior to serving RCUCC, I was Executive Director of BorderLinks, a bi-national, faith-based non-profit organization, dedicated to education and advocacy that raised awareness and inspired action around border issues (U.S.) and sustainable development and community service (Mexico). While these ministries gave me a solid platform to continue to specialize in faith-based immigration education and activism, my new position as Senior Pastor at RCUCC called for a broader interpretation of ministry, which incorporated the many elements of local church leadership.

I began ministry at RCUCC with a year-long process of discernment with two retreats for church members designed to explore our collective “roots of faith”, establish core values, review our church's history of ministry, name and affirm our individual skills and gifts, and establish our “baseline” criteria for future ministry. As a result of that work together, we identified the following two scriptural references as guidelines for discerning God's call to us as a congregation:

Blessed are those who put their trust in God, with God for their hope. They are like a tree planted by the river that thrusts its roots toward the stream. When the heat comes it feels

no heat; its leaves stay green. It is untroubled in a year of drought, and never ceases to bear fruit.

— Jeremiah 17: 7-8

I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” Then these just will ask, ‘when did we see you hungry and feed you, or see you thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you as a stranger and invite you in, or clothe you in your nakedness? When did we see you ill or in prison and come to visit you?’ The ruler will answer them, ‘the truth is, every time you did this for the least of my sisters or brothers, you did it for me.’

— Matthew 25:35-40

Listening to and Honoring our Footprint in the Borderlands

A generous unrestricted bequest of \$350,000 provided the means by which we could live into our biblical mandates. Three projects to enhance and share our church campus grew out of our first year of discernment that would prepare the way for ministry with “the least of these.” These three projects, planned with our central Biblical texts of Jeremiah and Matthew’s gospel, brought a deeper awareness and experience of what it means to “Be the Church” in the borderlands of the Sonoran Desert.

Children’s Play Space

The General Minister and President of the United Church of Christ, local UCC clergy, and I are standing in the middle of our church’s new “children’s gathering space.” The Tucson sun is just descending creating one of those unforgettable Tucson multicolor sunsets but there is still enough light to reveal the space surround us. What used to be a barren strip of dry earth behind our church offices is now an intergenerational gathering space, where children play with and climb over organic straw-bale construction slides and benches, jump off different sizes and

heights of tree trunks, and make music on handmade instruments, and do gymnastics on repurposed playground equipment that had previously been abandoned. Children crawl through holes cut in walls, play homemade drums built to last, grind seeds in a *molcajete*,⁴⁵ and play in water squirting from a fountain purposely gone berserk.

Throughout the space, mosaic stepping-stones created by congregation members make a “path through the desert” and barely contain tumbling chaos of the space. Iron gates on each end reveal a cut out tree made up of figures of people playing, climbing, and being church together. A black comma is the gate latch – echoing the God Is Still Speaking campaign of the UCC. Native plants grow up over the gates and arches that cover the play-spaces. Native trees provide shade for rest and play. Straw-bale curving benches shaded by latticed wisteria provide seating for community elders to join in on the fun. This is a space of dignity, beauty, and joy in which worship space moves outside the church and is reimagined to include open, environmentally friendly, safe, beautiful, creative and flexible expressions of “church.” The land for “The Children’s Place”, so long neglected, now remembers that it was once desert, and gathers God’s people into itself as a space of extravagant welcome, play, intergenerational relationship, and above all, respect for the history and possibilities inherent in the borderlands of the Sonoran Desert. Rev. John Dorhauer, our new General Minister and President of the UCC, clearly moved by this new thing we are doing, quoted Dag Hammarskjold saying, “For all that has been, *thank you*. For all that is to come, *yes*.”

⁴⁵ Rough stone mortar and pestle used in Mexico.

“For all that has been, *thank you*. For all that is to come, *yes*.” These words have been a mantra for RCUCC since I became the Senior Pastor. RCUCC, a church established in the “high” of the fifties, the awakening of the late sixties to the eighties, and the unraveling that continues through today is coming to grips with what it means to be on a new frontier of decline and constant crisis. When I first came to the church, a developing rift between the old and new guard was palpable. There was talk of “two churches” – one “emerging” church within our church that worshiped in the round at 8:45 am and the other the traditional worship with the big organ, grand piano and pews at 10:45 am. Since three churches in our conference have split in two in the last two years over the growing generational and cultural divides, anxieties grew within some that we might be next to split. A team gathered to work on unity that honored, but was not chained to the past. We didn’t succumb to the fear of “throwing the baby (Jesus) out with the bathwater.” We examined tradition and culture and kept what continued to be sustaining and liberating, and we leaned into how our *yes* might meet God’s *yes*.

While there are still some elders, nomads, and heroes around to talk about the “good old days,” the maturing artists and coming-of-age prophets are sharing the stage in planning for the future. My participation in the D. Min studies at Drew helped me to articulate the idea of “Being Church in the Borderlands” as an opportunity to step into new understandings and practices of church for the postmodern world. At the same time, we stay anchored in the wisdom of our elders, nomads and heroes through storytelling during worship, articles in our newsletters, and good pastoral care by myself and other community members. My hope was to replicate something I saw in Chiapas, Mexico where I ministered for four years, where the elders entered the gathering spaces first and sat along the outside walls, and younger community members filed past them, bowing slightly, waiting to be blessed by the elders before choosing a seat. I thought

that if we could adopt some sort of ritual that supported the same sense of respect, we could navigate change with the approval of the elders. By honoring our elders and building relationship with and through them, some significant resistance is falling away. When elders are included in the planning stages of church-building and not “tacked-on” at the end of things, their fear of being left behind fades and they engage more enthusiastically in change.

A Community Kitchen

We explored ways in which to make communion a community norm, rather than a spare meal the last Sunday of the month. We decided that a remodeling and repurposing of our church kitchen was one way to open our church to share communion with a wider circle of people. In an effort to share our space with groups that could not otherwise afford commercial kitchen space, we upgraded the kitchen with the needs of the greater community in mind. In order to ensure that this too would be a “gathering space” outside of the sanctuary and fellowship hall, we created a large 6x20 foot island in the middle of the kitchen that can accommodate 30 people around it.

Picture five refugee women teaching 20 church members how to cook their mothers’ recipes while sharing their mothers’ stories. Eight troubled youth, eight congregation members, two coaches and a professional chef learning commercial restaurant practices together as we share stories and food. Smell the smells of six women cooking a meal for 50 men and women who are homeless, which they will take and share with them later in the afternoon. Hear the sounds of laughter and conversation of RCUCC teens with teens from an African American church across town. Feel the warmth coming out of the ovens as our church elders prepare a

meal for the parents/caregivers/grandparents of children in the congregation and neighborhood. This is another way in which RCUCC is saying *yes* to new understandings of Being Church in the Borderlands.

A Community Labyrinth

Although RCUCC sits on five and one-half acres of formerly desert land, we use only a small portion of it for classrooms, offices, and meeting space. The new Children's Play Place and upgraded kitchen were first steps in recognizing the potential of finding the sacred in the mundane and sharing space and practice across generational, cultural, and religious borders. Both new spaces became multigenerational gathering spaces for community building, play, food preparation and sharing table at RCUCC and beyond.

Two areas still promised both deeper connection with the history and people of the land, including our current neighbors, as well as another space outside formal worship to gather, praise and pray together. The first was a scraggly acre on the northeast side of church property, behind the back-church parking lot. A parsonage once stood on that corner or land but was torn down after being ransacked and used for illicit drug deals. The lot became neglected, a sore spot to the eyes and therefore no longer seen as part of church property. The second is beside and to the south of the first, and holds the memory of basketball and tennis games, children playing on Jungle Gyms, slides, and swings. What once was a happy and busy space is now enclosed in high fences with locked gates. The fence and gates went up when neighborhood youth, and later adult drug dealers, began to use the space and leave traces of their nighttime activities. Most of

the playground equipment has been repurposed for the Children's Play Place. The rest of the lot contains scrub weeds and a covered shelter.

We chose to develop the empty lot to the Northeast of the church into a labyrinth, art installations and desert garden. I found notes from a congregational 50-year plan that dreamed of desert gardens and a labyrinth in the northeast corner lot. As I began asking members about that plan, I noticed my questions elicited strong emotional responses: people either hated the idea of a labyrinth (too "woo-woo") or were fervently in favor of it! I began to take people out to the land to pray before and after meetings, to get down and feel the earth in our hands, to wonder who had inhabited this land and what past and future promise it might hold. A small group of octogenarian members began visiting labyrinths around town and gathering literature on the purpose and design of labyrinths. I suspect because they were elders, those who were opposed to the plan did not publicly object, thinking perhaps that they could not carry through with their plans anyway.

But they did carry through with their plans. After writing two proposals and having one turned down, they were granted half the funds they needed to build the labyrinth. Younger people in their sixties and seventies joined the group, and plans were made to lay a crushed granite gravel path, outlined by large stones, supplemented by very large turquoise and granite stones. The naysayers chuckled under their breath, until the church elders found a "nice young man" who would clear and prepare the land, with areas designated for play spaces, shaded benches, pools and a water feature. We prayed over the land, remembering that our 5 and one-half acres was once part of Mexico and that, indeed it was part of the borderlands of Mexico and the U.S. We prayed and played border music by a local immigration activist and singer, Pablo

Perigrino. We laid the stones to songs like *Joselina*, a young woman who died making the journey north and whose remains were found by Samaritan volunteers. Kathe, the labyrinth organizer, told stories of the Sanctuary Movement of the 1980s, when she and others defied the law to help asylum-seekers from Central America cross the border and make their way to safety in the U.S. A strong sense of purpose developed among the volunteers, of connecting the migrants' journey with RCUCC's labyrinth, which was the only prayer path along our North-South corridor of the east side of Tucson. A few of the naysayers joined in, worried that the elders just might die completing their dream of a labyrinth. The labyrinth project group grew as more RCUCC members got involved by donating "volunteer" trees and shrubs to plant on the property.

The labyrinth was to me, "the little engine that could" or a "way out of no way." Unsupported by the general church population, underfunded, and with a ragtag band of volunteers, the official labyrinth opening on Easter morning of 2017 drew 36 people at dawn for Easter Sunrise service. The naysayers also told us that no one would show up for the Easter blessing of the land and labyrinth walk. They were wrong. Today neighbors and people who attend meetings at the church walk the labyrinth and leave little mementos of their journey at the center and written testimonies in the journal located in a wooden box at the end to what the labyrinth walk meant to them. The space has come alive again and is a gathering space that centers and sustains people through difficult times in their lives and the world.

Periodically during the construction and planting stage, we held prayer services on the lot, imagining neighbors walking the path in early morning and twilight. Making the path became a meditation in itself, laying step over step of quiet reflection on top of gravel and rock.

I often came in to church around 7am to find one or two people quietly working or sitting on the shaded benches. Neighbors began to use the space, adults and children alike. Today, the labyrinth is surrounded by desert plants and trees, shaded benches, and water reservoirs to catch and hold rain water. A team of RCUCC community members care for the space and plan activities that nurture the spirit of RCUCC members, ministry partners, and neighbors.

We couldn't know then, that very soon the labyrinth would be a "way out of no way" for a man threatened with deportation, where he would find solace and grace as he waited for the time he might be reunited with his family. He would become the primary caretaker of the path, carefully and lovingly raking, weeding, watering and walking the path himself at sunrise and sunset.

All three projects played into our next leap of faith, of opening our church to offer hospitality to "at risk and vulnerable" people in our community. Once again, we didn't know our destination from the beginning, but we found our way to the next right steps in recovering and reclaiming our calling that "thrusts our roots toward the stream... and bears fruit," and ministers with "the least of these." As we grew in relationship with the land upon which the church was built, we also reached out to embrace those who were at risk and vulnerable to deportation, claiming the land for church family that extended across borders.

Next Steps

In 2014, three years after many thousands of Syrian refugees began fleeing their war-torn country, and shortly after the first waves of mothers with children and unaccompanied minor refugees began to roll across the U.S.-Mexico border, the RCUCC's Justice and Witness

Ministry Team identified the global refugee crisis as our primary mission focus for 2015. That year we determined that we would focus sermons, community outreach, workshops, and short-term “mission trips,” or mini-immersion experiences, on the refugee crisis, specifically as it impacted the borderlands adjacent to southern Arizona, including the 60-mile stretch between the U.S.-Mexico border and Tucson, and our southern neighbors of Mexico and Central America.

During 2015, 12 Rincon members and friends participated in a one-day U.S.–Mexico border immersion experience to learn first-hand about the issues that caused the sudden flood of women and children refugees at our border. As a result of that immersion experience, RCUCC donated \$2,500 to a Mexican microcredit nonprofit organization that gave small loans to women on the Mexico side of the border who needed support not to migrate north. Our church approved another \$4,500 that went to the Tucson Lutheran Refugee Project to support refugee children’s needs for school supplies and transportation for school activities. Another \$10,000 went to BorderLinks, a nonprofit dedicated to education and advocacy around immigration issues. Most recently, an intergenerational group from RCUCC put together 200 food bags for the Tucson Samaritans to take on their daily trips into the desert to search for migrants who had become disabled or lost. Still, RCUCC’s ministry with children and migrant families from south of Arizona’s borders consisted mainly of donations, with relatively little embodied ministry with these vulnerable and at risk populations of people in Tucson or beyond.

How could we possibly bridge the walls, literal, technological, legal, and cultural that divided us from our neighbors in need? Could we get beyond subject-object relationship to see and hear the agency of the people bleeding on our doorsteps? Was it possible for RCUCC members to cross over into the world of migrants and refugees without doing harm, without

simply benefitting ourselves and sense of church in the doing? Could we form meaningful relationships with our neighbors through which we could help to heal the *open wounds* of the borderlands?

Can our church in the borderlands bridge the gap between the oppositional forces in the borderlands in Tucson, and our own church? Gloria Anzaldúa, writing within *la cultura chicana* (the Chicana culture), addresses the need to get beyond commonly held oppositional thoughts and actions in the borderlands, and offers wise counsel to avoid a self-righteous and oppositional approach of “us and them” and “right and wrong” that also applies to non-Chicana culture as we discern, within a diverse church population how to proceed:

A counter-stance locks one into a duel of oppressor and oppressed locked in mortal combat, like the cop and the criminal, both are reduced to a common denominator of violence. The counter-stance refutes the dominate culture’s views and beliefs, and, for this, it is proudly defiant. All reaction is limited by, and dependent on, what it is reacting against. Because the counter-stance stems from a problem with authority—outer as well as inner—it’s a step towards liberation from the cultural domination. *But it is not a way of life. At some point, on our way to a new consciousness, we will have to leave the opposite bank, the split between the two mortal combatants somehow healed so that we are on both shores at once and, at once, see through serpent and eagle eyes.* Or perhaps we will decide to disengage from the dominant culture, write it off altogether as a lost cause, and cross the border into a wholly new and separate territory. Or we might go another route. The possibilities are numerous once we decide to act and not react.⁴⁶ (100-101: Italics mine)

Even in a liberal-to-progressive church, to act and not react, to see without blinders and assumptions behind righteousness, or right-relation, requires a commitment to see and hear the

⁴⁶ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands: The New Mestiza = La Frontera.*, 100-101.

needs of congregation members and migrants and asylum-seekers. Soon we would find ourselves, thrust upon the “opposite shore,” and into the lives of the very people with whom we longed to build relationships that matter. The tension between our tendency to want to “fix” and our discomfort with simple (yet so complicated) accompaniment will need to be carefully and thoughtfully addressed in order to discern our next right steps in ministry with migrants and asylum-seekers from Central America.

CHAPTER 6: FOLLOWING JESUS ACROSS BORDERS

Our response might best be summed up by the word accompaniment: to deviate from other pathways for a while (and then forever), to walk together with those on the margins, to be with them, to let go. Accompaniment is an idea so radical and difficult for us to comprehend that its power for mutual healing and significance reveal themselves to our Euro-western and northern minds only slowly and with great difficulty. Through this encounter with Christ at the margins, we, who with Francis once saw the poor only as the “other,” the feared one, the object of dread, then pity, then charity, can, as individuals and societies, experience a profound, ongoing, Spirit-led conversion of heart, soul, and mind. Slowly, as marginalized people allow us to walk with them, our center of gravity moves outside of ourselves and we find ourselves suddenly.

— Marie Dennis, *St. Francis and the Foolishness of God*

THE PROJECT PHASE

Following is a summary of observations from the three cross-cultural mini-immersion experiences that formed the foundation for this D. Min project:

1. January 17, 2017: The Inn Project, Christ United Methodist Church, Tucson Program:

Eight people had signed up to attend the mini-immersion experience at the church less than a mile from RCUCC. None of us had ever been there, and it afforded us a chance to become acquainted with their facility and volunteers, which I hoped would encourage ecumenical relationships between the two churches. Seven members, including one member of the Local Advisory Committee (LAC), one other clergy person, a new member, and two winter visitors showed up, plus the recalcitrant teen of a member, a new visitor to RCUCC, and a friend of a member. The new member and visitor both were very enthusiastic to see that RCUCC offered such opportunities to better understand justice issues, and to check out possible volunteer opportunities for themselves.

Jamie and Michael, the two CUMC volunteer leaders of the program, met us and shared the history of their involvement in the Inn Project. The church had just completed a full bathroom with shower in their Fellowship Hall, when Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials approached their bishop to see if UMC churches might be able to offer accommodations as well as help making connections with asylum-seekers' sponsors and coordinating travel arrangements from Arizona to their sponsor's location. Michael, a middle-aged African American man, told us:

I was the first and loudest to speak out and say I would do this. I always think, "What would Jesus do?" I came from North Carolina and had no idea about immigration policy and practice. What I have learned here is that these people are just like you and me. They want the same things that we want. We had just gotten showers and the new bathroom put in in October, and then God dropped these people on us. Donald Trump sure wasn't going to stay here. But these people needed a place to stay just like Jesus did. When we met to make up a name for the project, within minutes we came up with "The Inn Project," because there was no room for Jesus at the inn. We had room.

Jamie, the White female coordinator of the project said:

I came straight from a conservative seminary (Asbury) in Virginia and had NO IDEA how my tax dollars were being spent. I had never heard of or seen these people and their problems. Hospitality means loving an asylum-seeker or migrant like we love our own family. I had times when I needed help to get where I am today and if I hadn't had it, I would not be a graduate of seminary or be here today. So, I believe in helping others. That's what we do as church. I take families upstairs to pray in the sanctuary, and sometimes they come to church on Sunday. Border Patrol calls these people "bodies", as in, "I am bringing four bodies to the church." These are bodies, real bodies, with real people in them!

Jamie and Michael told us that by the time parents and children arrived at their church, everything that identified them as a person had been removed, except their clothes. Even shoelaces were confiscated, as was anything they had brought from home, including

photographs, letters, Bibles, and other personal possessions. When they arrived at the shelter, they came with the same clothes they had worn when apprehended days before, and an ID bracelet with their “alien identification.” No name. Just a number. Jamie reported that the first thing volunteers did when guests arrived was to cut those bracelets off and give them name tags. Then, after a day or two of waiting for details to be worked out for their transfer to a place and person they had probably never known, they boarded a bus that would often take them days to arrive at their destination. The parent and small children were completely alone again for this part of their journey, forced once more to make do with the sack of food they were given along with a few personal items and a stuffed animal for the child. Once they made it to where their sponsor lived, they waited, sometimes years, before they would learn whether they would be returned to the violence from which they had come, or start a new life in the U.S. Meanwhile, they would be in limbo, vulnerable and at risk of deportation at any moment.

Afterward I asked Jamie and Michael if I could translate a conversation with the women who sat with blankets on the floor with their small children. I suspected they would be reluctant to allow a stranger to reliably and accurately serve as a *porta voz* – to carry the women’s voices to the ears of the visiting strangers. But knowing my history in Mexico, work in immigration, and clergy status, they consented easily, probably because their hosts spoke little Spanish and they had not had opportunities to share their journey due to their short stay at the church.

Two of the women had come with children and one with a one-year-old grandchild. All had fled violence and extortion, two having witnessed the murder of a loved one who refused to cooperate with gangs. One left her home in Central Mexico with no planning because she received a threat that her daughter would be taken, raped and killed. The women and their

children appeared weary and shell-shocked by their journey across Mexico in buses, vans and on foot. Upon presentation at the border and filing a petition for asylum, they were “processed,” over 72 hours, sleeping in ice-cold “cages” on the floor in a football field-length hanger. They verified what I have been told, that the temperature was kept very low and their jackets, shoes, and blankets were confiscated. In their place, each was given a “moon blanket” of “aluminum foil” to wrap themselves in. The Border Patrol and ICE officials transported all persons and their immigration papers in two separate vehicles to the shelters in Tucson. Often the people arrived before their papers and had to wait hours in the church parking lot in a closed vehicle until their papers arrived. Meanwhile, their hunger and bathroom needs had to wait.

Interpreting suffering people’s stories requires that the interpreter move herself out of the way. No feelings, other than those of the one being interpreted for, are appropriate. The interpreter’s body and voice follows the speaker such that the interpreter disappears, and the listeners see and hear only the speaker. That requires a certain discipline, which I am accustomed to as a pastor, but can have intense after-emotions and reactions, especially when the story is one of injustice and suffering.

Afterwards, at our debriefing session, I found myself still aloof from my own feelings, which was helpful because there was still more to come from the group. While group members wanted to move to “fix this” mode right away, I know that an important part of the process is to speak first to feelings. When emotional affect is connected to reason, transformation is more likely. Reluctantly, most found their way to their emotions, expressing feeling overwhelmed, guilty, privileged, honored, inspired, sad, angry, and hopeful. The formerly recalcitrant teen was

animated and eager to learn more and get involved. She and her mom signed up to volunteer the very next day!

Group members received a packet of reading materials, which included an annotated bibliography for suggested reading. Several group members went on to read *Enrique's Journey*, and six signed up to volunteer for accompaniment shifts. One of those went on to partner with another church's programs that helps to fill out papers for African asylum-seekers. In no way did this threaten their participation at RCUCC; it enhanced it, as they were eager to bring their learnings back to our church and discern how we might get more involved in ministry with asylum-seekers and migrants.

2. April 4, 2017: Kino Border Initiative (KBI) -

A full-day visit to Nogales, Sonora with the Jesuit binational organization dedicated to help make humane, just, workable migration between the U.S. and Mexico a reality. They provide direct assistance and accompaniment of migrants, social and pastoral care of communities on both sides of the border, and research and advocacy to transform U.S. immigration policy and practice. KBI is a joint project of The California Province of the Society of Jesus, Jesuit Refugee Services/U.S., The Missionary Sisters of the Eucharist, The Mexican Province of the Society of Jesus, the Catholic Diocese of Tucson and of Hermosillo, Sonora, Mexico. The Nazareth House women's shelter and the *comedor* (soup kitchen) are staffed by volunteers from the local area and around the world who come from diverse backgrounds, ages, and abilities, with many from inter-religious settings.

Ten RCUCC members (eight women and two men) participated in the second mini immersion experience, including two members of the LAC and two new members. One winter visitor and politically conservative member and strong informal leader of our congregation admitted to “never having done anything like this before,” but considering the new president’s executive orders concerning migrants and refugees, “wanted to go down and see for myself.” One of our newest members shared that she was going so she could practice her Spanish. We divided up into four separate vehicles and I asked people to notice the changes in the landscape as they drew nearer to the border, and particularly notice how the experience of entering Mexico differed from the experience of entering the U.S.

We met Father Pete on the U.S. side of the border for orientation. He showed us an elaborate special entry for disabled people, which had an entrance but no exit. Once inside the structure, the passage was walled off and did not go beneath the road as it was meant to. Instead, those who had ventured down into the entry had to find their way back up and take the long walking route into Mexico. Father Pete spoke of the importance for allies and advocates to “humanize, accompany, and complicate.” We understood the first two actions, but he had to explain “complicate.” He said our role was to complicate the lives and stories we tell ourselves and others about the reality at the border, to “mess with assumptions of privilege and power,” and draw attention to the dissonance between our entry and that of the deportees. It was clear to me from the beginning that this quick trip to the border was messing with people’s sense of who they were and who we are as a people of faith and country. That I know, when properly and thoughtfully facilitated, is what singer-songwriter Leonard Cohen describes in his song *Anthem* as the “crack that lets the light get in.”

The Mariposa port of entry, which is the port on the edge of Nogales, Mexico and mostly used by truckers and vacationers to the Sea of Cortez, had a major overhaul in 2015. It has always been the quicker route, although it only had a few lanes. With the multimillion dollar remodeling of the port, twelve lanes and a gorgeous handicapped accessible park-like passage, lined with exotic desert planting and large and delicate metal designs, the walking path is divided into two lanes. The one we took was wide and meandered through the gardens, dotted with water fountains and pretty benches. The other was a long cage of sorts, through which shackled deportees would walk in single file with only the clothes on their backs into Mexico. They could neither turn back nor dawdle along the way. For them, the march south was filled with anxiety and grief over the separation from family members, from homes and lives in the US, and from the possibility of ever returning to the U.S. Walking right next to them outside of the mile-long cage, were American counterparts who entered their country without even showing identification. Though there were no deportees when we crossed, we felt the weight of their mostly late-night passage when no one would see their return in defeat.

We walked the mile up a steep hill to the migrant women's shelter. I was surprised that this first encounter in Mexico was so strange and new to most participants. The steep cement streets, lack of accessibility, peeling paint, and no elevators in the four-story condominiums made the location seem "very poor" to several, when it was actually a middle class condominium where the Jesuits had bought two secure apartments. The shelter was on the road very near to the port of entry, so traffic was heavy in migrants, "narcos", and human smugglers. The situation was so unsafe that the sisters told us the women could not go down the hill to the soup kitchen or they would be "picked off" (kidnapped). Security cameras were everywhere but we

were told that no one paid any attention to them. The sense of the border and all the hope and struggle embodied there was palpable.

We climbed four flights of steep stairs and wondered how migrants, weak, exhausted, and often injured from their journey, could make the climb. Father Neeley said he struggled to climb those stairs many times a day, despite needing a knee replacement. As we entered the sparsely furnished apartments, we began to notice the sacrifice of the Kino staff and volunteers who were committed to this ministry of accompaniment, and the great luxury the apartment, bed, and meals were to the women migrants who had found their way there through great sacrifice. Sisters Cecilia and Mariana urged us to sit, which some people felt uncomfortable with, because there were not enough chairs. I explained that our task there was to accept the hospitality that they so generously offered, while our hosts chose to stand. Our group began to feel the discomfort of being treated well by people who had been treated so badly.

One member writes in his post-visit participant feedback form:

Father Neeley and Sister Cecilia demonstrate a high level of commitment and compassion to the mission KBI and the people they serve. The migrant women at this shelter held their Christian faith as their greatest hope for the future, with great expectation that God would deliver them safely to a better life on earth. The volunteers at *el comedor*, under the leadership of Sister Engracia, were treated with dignity and compassion. Sister understood the psychological impact of deportation and dealt with the situation very effectively.

I am not a frequent visitor to the border, so I was surprised to notice the fortress that has been put in place at the Mariposa crossing. It looks like Berlin in another era.

Another reflects:

There is no way to be indifferent to the circumstances of those immigrants/ refugees, caught as they are in between their shattered pasts and seemingly hopeless futures. How to translate feelings of concern into meaningful action is and will, however, be an ongoing challenge. The whole experience was eye (and heart and mind) opening! Seeing the physical infrastructure used in the deportation process was a shock. An appalling testimony to the waste of resources without seeming rationale except as a deliberate effort to dehumanize (further dehumanize?) deportees.

Once back in Tucson, we stopped for dinner and debrief at a Mexican restaurant near the church. Everyone stayed, and our dinner was subdued and conversation thoughtful. How could we reconcile our dinner together with what lay before the women and men at the shelter and soup kitchen. The money we spent on dinner could easily pay for a couple of bus trips back to their home states or countries. I could feel the wheels turning as participants even then began to distance themselves from what they had experienced. Would this trip translate, as one member asked, into action that mattered? I didn't know at the time, but it would and did.

3. April 27, 2017: “Keep Tucson Together” a Tucson non-profit and free legal clinic at the Pueblo High School - A free legal clinic designed to provide legal support to members of protection networks and the community at large, Keep Tucson Together works with volunteer attorneys and faith communities to create a network of resources for vulnerable and at-risk families.

A new opportunity for an immersion experience came alongside the new president's January, 2017 Executive Order regarding immigrants and refugees. Under the new Executive Orders, asylum-seekers from predominantly Muslim countries would be barred from entry into the U.S., and Immigrations and Customs Enforcement would step up efforts to deport people in this country illegally. That number in 2017 was estimated at approximately 12 million adult

immigrants, many of whom had lived peaceful and productive lives in the U.S., and whose children were U.S. citizens. Fear and anger were pervasive among migrants whose immigration status was now being scrutinized. Those who feared deportation began to stay home, not making medical appointments or English classes or driving unless absolutely necessary.

Local faith community members and other allies formed “Keep Tucson Together,” a free legal clinic that counseled those under threat of immediate deportation when they went for their yearly check-in with Immigration Customs Enforcement (ICE) officials. Twice a week, Keep Tucson Together volunteers helped those who could apply for citizenship to do so, and also offered strategies for those at risk of imminent deportation. Margo Cowan, a Tucson immigration attorney in Tucson for 45 years, invited us to “come and see” the havoc being wreaked on families in the Tucson area by the new administration’s Executive Order. Over a few hours, we experienced up close and personal the devastating consequences of the new policies on human life here on the border.

The third immersion experience turned out to be far less expensive and exhausting than the original trip planned to Mexico’s southern border with Father Conrado and the Jesuit Immigration would have been. That original plan was to take a group from RCUCC to Chiapas, Mexico on a ten-day cross-cultural immersion experience, but such an extended trip required more planning than this D. Min project entailed. In retrospect, I believe that seeing the degree of heightened suffering right in our own backyard helped participants see that mission with Latin American migrants and asylum-seekers is needed right here in Tucson as much as it is in southern Mexico.

Six women and one man met me in the parking lot of the predominantly Hispanic high school, which is known for its social justice activism. One member of the LAC, two long-time Spanish speaking border activists, an eighty-four-year-old woman who seriously needed a hip replacement, a married couple who were new to border issues and I comprised this mini immersion delegation. Darkness was just falling as families were everywhere, with small gleeful children running ahead while tense-looking adults followed them to the cafeteria. We fell in line and noticed, as we walked, the strain on the faces and bodies of parents and grandparents. The smell of fear was thick in the air as the adults gathered, while the children ran screaming and playing just outside, oblivious to the drama that was unfolding there.

In one large room, about fifteen volunteers, mostly elderly and from local churches, worked side by side with mostly Spanish speakers, helping them navigate the difficult process of filing for citizenship. This was a happy room, filled with possibilities and animated conversations between volunteers who spoke English and the immigrants, most of whom spoke Spanish. Hands flew as motions replaced words and laughter pealed as people worked their way through the numerous forms.

From there we moved into the larger room, filled with about 350 adults and children, women clinging to mothers and husbands, biting fingernails and going outside for a smoke. They were awaiting the arrival of the immigration lawyer and her helpers, who brought posters and materials for people to fill out and carry with them should they be stopped. The attorney arrived and spoke in Spanish about the urgency of the situation in which many people whose deportations had been stayed for years, while they paid attorneys thousands of dollars to help them navigate the morass that is the U.S. Immigration system. The president's Executive Order

in January of 2017 effectively made the 11 million undocumented migrants in the U.S. fair game for deportation – regardless of whether they were law-abiding citizens, had U.S. citizen children, or had home and jobs and churches and fruitful lives in the U.S. She told those gathered around her how suddenly, people who showed up for their yearly appointments with ICE were being unceremoniously and without notice deported, transported that very day back to Mexico. She gave them signs to put in their windows that “should” prevent ICE officials from entering without a warrant. They filled out forms saying that she was their attorney, so if they were stopped, they could show they had representation, which hopefully would slow down the deportation process.

We watched people weep and tremble with fear. One woman approached me and began speaking in rapid-fire Spanish. She had five children who were citizens and she had taken in three children of her sister who had just died of cancer. She was responsible for her mother too, and she didn't think she could live with the stress in her body. She was trembling all over and breathing fast. She was apoplectic with anger and fear. Multiply her by 300 and you can get a sense of the tension in the room. A few would be taken in by local churches and synagogues, but such a step meant that they would have to stay in the faith community and never leave, until their immigration status was resolved. That didn't seem like a viable option to most. For us, it was a peek into a way our church might respond to the immigration crisis, by taking a family into our church as a part of our faith family.

As we huddled together at a picnic table outside, once more we were so aware of our privilege and their suffering, which in part, contributed to our lifestyles. We knew they were surrogates for what U.S. citizens didn't want to or wouldn't do. They cooked our food, cleaned

our houses, groomed our gardens, built our houses, slaughtered and harvested our food, and worked as day laborers. They earned below minimum wage, often in substandard conditions. And always they lived with the possibility of being imprisoned or deported at any moment. And here they were, being dumped on the curb by the new administration, after they had sacrificed so much to do our grunt work. RCUCC members expressed feeling a burning shame and sadness. One couple was absolutely staggered by what they saw and expressed anger and sadness that they had chosen not to see the suffering right under their noses. By the time we gathered there at Keep Tucson Together, RCUCC had been approached by the immigration attorney to consider providing shelter for these at risk and vulnerable people. We left the high school just before Easter Sunday, knowing that our resurrection practice was going to take us places we had never dreamed of going with our neighbors to the south.

CHAPTER 7: WORDS MATTER

Finding Language for Mission and Ministry at RCUCC

While crossing the many barriers of ethnicity, class, race, education, and nationality that separate people from one another may not necessarily make them friends, what it can do is to help Christians understand Jesus' gospel call to love their neighbor in a new way.

—Rebecca Todd Peters. *Solidarity Ethics: Transformation in a Globalized World*

Words provide the building blocks upon which cultures are conceived. Words can build up and tear down. Connect or divide. Empower and disempower. Words can heal and harm. As an interpreter between the English and Spanish languages, I see how one's own social location and cultural assumptions can change the meaning of the author/speaker to include and exclude, illuminate and obfuscate. "They" can become "he." "Housekeeper" can become "girl." "Men" can become "boys." Words reveal pejorative assumptions and convey power relationships. Words matter.

I have taken the path in my ministry to both deconstruct and reconstruct commonly held words and concepts to illuminate the justice, or lack thereof, in the language we use, and to lead the way into realities in which the *kingdom* of God is made manifest. Common translation of "the poor" changes to "people-made-poor" in order to reveal the process and personhood of impoverishment, as does "people-made-rich" reveal the personhood and process of wealth. Instead of language that fixes God and people in time, space, culture, gender, and activity, RCUCC embraces the emancipatory use of language that deconstructs words and concepts of exclusion, exploitation, and oppression and reconstructs language of inclusion, cooperation, and mutual empowerment.

From the outset of this D Min project, finding language appropriate for my narrative of concern and opportunity was problematic. I wanted to explore the meaning and practice of *solidarity* between my church and Central American migrants and asylum-seekers. I hoped to explore the term *solidarity* to determine its underlying assumptions about power and privilege, and if it did not describe the ministry between RCUCC and Central American migrants and asylum-seekers, find another concept or new language that would most fully describe a just and mutually empowering ministry *with*, not *for* or *to* our neighbors to the south. I thought, including *solidarity* in my title would draw the attention of others who were researching this commonly used concept while also offering critique and alternative understandings and practices of ministry and mission.

While I found *solidarity* is the most common language used to describe church mission relationships, its use, unpacked, can perpetuate top-down, subject-object relationships and distract us from noticing the dominance of one mission “partner” over another. With the encouragement of my faculty advisors, I set out to explore ministry and mission between RCUCC and Latin American migrants and refugees without knowing what to call it. I didn’t want to presuppose the language that would describe the process or outcomes. I allowed the appropriate language to emerge through research and participation in the three immersion experiences included in the project design. I began to notice that what we called what we were doing didn’t matter so much as how we went about doing it. Did our cross-cultural immersion experiences facilitate just and loving power dynamics? Could we enter into space vastly different from our own with people in whose suffering we were, to some degree, complicit? Would these experiences be empowering for those with whom we visited as it was for members of RCUCC? How would we “do justice” through these visits and beyond? What sacrifices did

we need to make to be Good News with and for them? And finally, is any language adequate to describe relationships of such disparity and injustice? Is the work of ministry and mission with Latin American migrants and refugees a work in progress, a living into an ethic of solidarity, an “already and not-yet” act of *kingdom* building?

Below, I unpack the term *solidarity* as best I can in this short paper and explore other language describing mission partnership in order to find our way to language that envisions and promotes just and mutually empowering mission relationships.

Scriptural Witness: *Hesed*, *Tzadik*, and Good News

The notion of committed just and loving relationships between peoples of disparate cultures and contexts is reflected in Hebrew scriptures as *hesed*, often translated as *loving-kindness*, as experienced through God’s loving relationship and covenant with God’s people. In the Book of Ruth, *hesed* between Ruth and Naomi, and later between Ruth and Boaz embodies the notion of covenant between individuals. Another Hebrew word *tzadik*, meaning “righteous” and *tzedakah*, meaning “righteousness” appears over 500 times in the Hebrew Bible meaning ethical conduct in relationship between God and God’s people, and God’s people with each other.⁴⁷

In the New Testament or Christian Scriptures, John the Baptist, Jesus and his disciples drew people across borders together to proclaim the God’s in-breaking Good News as they walked with, not over and above, but with those who had been disenfranchised by empire and

⁴⁷ My translation.

Temple elite. There is no one language to describe these faith leaders' call and commitment to be the Good News described by the Prophet Isaiah and taken up by Jesus:

“to bring good news: to those who are poor; to heal broken hearts; to proclaim release to those held captive and liberation to those in prison; to announce a year of favor from YHWH, and the day of God’s vindication; to comfort all who mourn, to provide for those who grieve in Zion— to give them a wreath of flowers instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of tears, a cloak of praise instead of despair. They will be known as trees of integrity, planted by YHWH to display God’s glory.”

—Isaiah 61: 1-3

The intention to accompany, advocate on behalf of, and be ally, to “be Good News”, not just in words but also in body, is the ministry of healing, consolation and liberation in and through community. Being Good News requires us to cross socially constructed boundaries which *dis-empower* individuals and communities from their God-given potential and shares power in order to create a more just and loving world for all of God’s people.

Solidarity

“Solidarity is continuous relationship, fidelity to relationship, and mutual accountability.”

— Beverly Wildung Harrison and Carol S. Robb, *Making the Connections: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics*

The meaning and practice of solidarity have been fuzzy from the beginning, denoting different things to different people at different times. According to Rebecca Peters’ 2014 book entitled *Solidarity Ethics: Transformation in a Globalized World*, the term solidarity has been used in public discourse for over 200 years. However, she notes, “very little attention has been

given to defining and theorizing exactly what is meant by it.”⁴⁸ Peters writes that the term *solidarity* was present in the Napoleonic Code of 1804, which codified the collective responsibility to cover repayment of debts and insurance.⁴⁹ French philosopher and early socialist thinker, Charles Fourier, took the Code a step further in his publication of *Theorie de l’Unite*, in which he offered a new model for social organization based on mutual care and responsibility, noting that solidarity connoted both social insurance that covered debt and also a feeling that a community of people held for one another.⁵⁰ While Fourier’s concept of solidarity was limited to small utopian communities, French philosopher Pierre Leroux extended the concept to include the social society as a whole.⁵¹ Rebecca Peters concludes that solidarity created a dynamic tension between the rugged individualism that was foundational to the freedom movements of the Enlightenment Movement and the Industrial Revolution with a sense of collective responsibility for the common good.⁵²

In the early 1900’s German sociologist and political-economist Max Weber was the first to note that “groups or communities that exhibit solidarity demonstrate the importance of a shared feeling that binds them together in a way that offers a common identity— a “we,” so to

⁴⁸ Rebecca Todd Peters, *Solidarity Ethics: Transformation in a Globalized World*. Fortress Press. Kindle Edition, 17.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*, 20.

speak.”⁵³ Weber posits that a “we” group presumes a dualistic, “us” and “them” social relationship, which in turn presupposes a power dynamic of subject/object. “For the first time,” Peters continues, “the idea of solidarity is not just used to identify what binds groups of people together, but also to illustrate how this common bond may differentiate the group from others in potentially conflicting ways.”⁵⁴ Weber’s work begins an important critique of the concept of solidarity, asking who gets to decide who acts and who is acted upon.

In the later 19th and early 20th centuries, two movements on opposite sides of the oceans embraced concerns voiced by Weber and others in an effort to address the tensions inherent in the increasing focus on individual liberties on the modern world and the very human needs of connection as economic disparity increased between the authors of development and those left behind by it. The Social Gospel Movement in the U.S. and the Christian Socialist Movement in Europe began to read scripture through the lens of suffering and exploitation of workers and others adversely impacted by the capitalist notion of development. Protestant clergy and other church leaders began to articulate a theology that met the needs for justice and mercy of those adversely affected by Capitalist enterprise and advocated on their behalf for policies and practices of fair wages, worker safety, and reasonable work schedules. Peters adds: “In 1908, the Federal Council of Churches endorsed the “Social Creed of the Churches,” which detailed

⁵³ Ibid., 22.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

an explicit public social agenda for Protestants that grew out of their faith commitments to justice and equality.”⁵⁵

The concept and practice of *solidarity* expanded with the awareness of a need for the institutional church to respond to modernity and the economic disparities that developed. The idea exploded onto the global theological community through the Second Vatican Council of 1962-65 and Conferences of Latin American Bishops in Latin America that followed in the 80s. Catholic Pope John XXIII introduced the term *solidarity* in his Encyclical Letter, *Mater et Magistra 1961* and described the process of reading and responding to the signs of the time through which solidarity takes shape:

There are three stages which should normally be followed in the reduction of social principles into practice. First, one reviews the concrete situation; secondly, one forms a judgement on it in the light of these same principles; thirdly, one decides what can and should be done to implement these principles. These are the three stages that are usually expressed in the three terms: observe, judge act.(1961 # 236)

Jesuit Catholic priest, Jon Sobrino offered one of the most well-developed discussion of *solidarity* in his 1982 book, *Theology of Christian Solidarity*. Sobrino focused mainly on encouraging relationships of solidarity between Christian churches from the U.S. with churches in Latin America. He connected the desire of Christian communities to develop relationships of solidarity with impoverished and oppressed peoples of Latin America during the 80s with their growing awareness of and concern about the persecution of the Catholic Church and its people. Sobrino saw these relationships of solidarity as the expression of the true ministry and mission of

⁵⁵ Ibid., 24.

the Christian church— “to live into the catholicity of the church as the one universal church that reflected and represented the oneness of God.”⁵⁶

This practice of solidarity infused Latin American Liberation theology of the 80s and onward, and still is central to the understanding of pedagogies and theologies of liberation of Latin America and around the world. This understanding of *solidarity* was what first drew me to ministry. Through encounters with people in *Christian Base Communities*⁵⁷ in Cuernavaca and *El Pueblo Creyente* (people who believe) and *La Coordinación Diocesana de Mujeres* (Diocesan Women’s Group), I learned to read scripture through the lived experiences of people-made-poor and chose actions, alone and as a group, to embody the teachings of scripture in and through our lives.

I was excited to dive into the practice I had studied in seminary, but when I tried to apply the same process with participants in delegations to Mexico from the U.S., something was, literally and figuratively, lost in the translation. Like me, those who came “in solidarity” with people-made-poor and oppressed in Mexico were transformed in relationship with their neighbors in Mexico. Some returned home and sent funds to help with projects in the communities they had visited. One church in particular, developed a long-term relationship

⁵⁶ Ibid., 44.

⁵⁷ Groups within the Catholic Church that gathered around the “see, judge, act” methodology of Latin American Liberation Theology. Group members first recounted what was happening in their families, communities, country, and the world – then read the scripture lectionary reading for the day and made commitments about what they would do in the next weeks to live into the gospel in relationship to the reality of their lives.

with a community in Chiapas, visiting there over the years and inviting community members from Chiapas to the U.S. for visits with their “sister communities.”

However, feminist ethicist and theologian Beverly Wildung-Harrison writes: “Our inability to participate with authentic mutuality can destroy a liberation process. We often reproduce social relations of oppression unawares of our very efforts to “share” our experience”⁵⁸ The presence of foreigners, especially those who contributed money and muscle in solidarity with their Mexican hosts, bred distrust and envy with neighboring villages. Communities in Chiapas that were held together by a thin interpretation of solidarity were torn apart by preference given to some over the rest. “Sister communities” also implies free movement back and forth across geographic, cultural, and economic borders, which is not possible between vastly divergent communities. While on numerous occasions, members from one church in northern Minnesota easily visited the community in Amatenango, Chiapas, Mexico, but obtaining travel visas and finances from Amatenango to Minnesota was complicated and expensive. Who would be chosen and able to go from an impoverished reality to one of affluence and privilege? How do you mediate an encounter of people-made-poor in a place of unimagined wealth? Is this particular practice of solidarity liberating for members of both sister communities?

Justice is not so simply served. When the three representatives from Amatenango visited the mostly wealthy and White town in Minnesota, they expressed a fury in their understanding that wealth and power is built at the cost of exploitation of people and

⁵⁸ Wildung-Harrison, 244.

communities like theirs. As one member of the Mexican delegation put it, “Being a prophet is like walking along with a stone in your shoe. You want to walk with your friends and enjoy what they show you, but something hurts and you have to bend down and take the stone out. Where are the indigenous people here? Why do you have so much and we have so little. Something is very wrong here.”⁵⁹

Additionally, more often than not, visitors from the U.S. churches returned home and moved on to the next mission opportunity. For most, the experience of a week in “solidarity” was more of a vacation with Christ than an experience that led to a vocation with Christ. Solidarity then became something the more powerful and privileged chose and then un-chose, while the people-made-poor and power-less were acted upon and then dropped for the next exciting mission experience.

Current Thought on Solidarity

Peters describes three key points that are foundational for “first-world” people who wish to develop an ethic of solidarity and also encourage a wider and more just understanding of the process of solidarity. Her use of “third-world” embraces language developed after WWII for developed, capitalistic, and industrialized countries that were closely affiliated with the US. and our allies. Peters shows no awareness of the assumptions and biases behind her liberal use of “first-world” (67 times) nor does she define exactly what she means by the terms. Today the “third” or “two-thirds” world’s people are hemorrhaging into the “first” world, and the “first”

⁵⁹ Paty Camacho, lay leader in Amatenango, Chiapas, Mexico on a delegation to Minnesota in June of 2002.

world military-industrial complex is literally making a killing on the soil and souls of “third” world peoples. “First-world” connotes wealth and power, while “third-world” perpetuates stereotypes of “the poor” who are lazy and ignorant. For those with whom I worked in Mexico, language of “first and third-world” is just a thinly disguised rewording of colonizer-colonized and developed-developing world. More frequently, language of “majority world” articulates our global reality that “first-world” people are in fact the minority.

Despite Peters’ use of outdated and pejorative language in her understanding of global community, I still found her arguments for an ethic and theology of solidarity compelling. The three points which she describes as foundational to solidarity include understanding social location and personal privilege; building relationships with people across lines of difference; and engaging in structural change.⁶⁰ To me, her conceptualizations of solidarity encompass awareness both of power and privilege and commitment to give over, share and restore power where and to whom it rightfully belongs. In practice the solidarity that Peters promotes is perhaps only barely possible, but so is the *kingdom* of God here on earth. We have to start somewhere.

In the Spring of 2017, just as this D. Min project unfolded, RCUCC began a class on “White Privilege: Let’s Talk”, which drew 36 participants over a six-week evening class. Participants, all but one of whom identified as “White”, and followed a “resource for

⁶⁰ Peters, 10.

transformational dialogue, for disrupting White Supremacy from within”⁶¹ designed to encourage faith communities to do the work of understanding our social location and personal and collective privilege. Seven of the participants in this class also participated in one or more of the immersion experiences that were part of this D. Min project design. I believe this foundation of critical analysis of power and privilege of self and community at RCUCC helped pave the way for RCUCC’s three border immersion experiences and the bold choice of the church to provide hospitality to vulnerable and at-risk people in our community.

Peters continues, distinguishing between an ethic and theology of solidarity, noting that “[a]n ethic of solidarity is both a model for first-world Christians for how to live faithfully in the midst of a globalizing world (personal complicity and behavior) as well as a framework for a new way of imagining our political economy and our social networks and interactions (structural analysis and accountability).” An ethic of solidarity is a transformative ethic, rooted in the principles of sustainability and social justice, that requires first-world citizens to work simultaneously on transforming personal habits and lifestyles as well as global economic and political structures that perpetuate inequality and injustice.” An ethic of solidarity transforms relationships of individuals and communities through shared assumptions of sustainability, justice, and personal responsibility for evaluating and changing social norms that perpetuate inequality and oppression. “By contrast,” she writes, “a theology of solidarity is firmly rooted in the values of mutuality, justice, and sustainability.” She gives examples of possible issues through which an ethic and practice of solidarity could be applied, including “environmental

⁶¹ Rev. Dr. Tracy D. Blackmon et al., "White Privilege: Let's Talk," United Church of Christ, accessed December 4, 2017. <http://privilege.uccpages.org>.

degradation, economic disparity, and unjust form of globalization that plague our world today.” The practice of solidarity requires a careful analysis of disparities of power and privilege between social groups, or social “norms” that legitimate and perpetuate discrimination, and an exploration of how solidarity partners either profit or lose by the status quo. An ethic and theology of solidarity, according to Peters, would shape public discourse and practice around moral norms that benefit all of God’s people, indeed, all of God’s good creation. She concludes, “In a world that values and promotes unmitigated consumerism and wealth creation, practicing an ethic of solidarity requires first-world citizens to think and act in countercultural ways.”⁶²

I appreciate Peters’ insistence that solidarity encompasses both the prophetic and pragmatic. I concur that an ethic of solidarity recognizes the dissonance and difference between prophetic vision and lived reality. Our heritage of prophetic vision is a call to a reality that did and does not yet exist. It reminds God’s people of whom and whose we were and are. It holds out a counter-narrative to the present moment in such a way that it galvanizes individuals and communities to work together for a better world. Our faith story of origin is the *kingdom* of God made manifest first in word, and then action. God spoke creation into being and we are called to do likewise.

Rather than discarding an ethic of solidarity as idealistic or imperfect, at RCUCC we embraced the improbability and imperfection and live into the vision, but that did not stop us from taking action for what we saw was necessary positive social change. Like our ancestors in faith, we recognized that we get it wrong, fail, and get back up and try again. The idea behind

⁶² Peters, 7-8.

solidarity isn't "practice makes perfection," it is practice makes relationship, and through relationship, we and those with whom we are in ministry are transformed. Practice builds the bridges over which the Word, or God's Good News can pass.

Hospitality

In June of 2017, just as this D. Min project phase was coming to an end, two important events happened which moved the project forward in leaps and bounds. The first was when I was contacted by a long-time friend and colleague, Margo Cowan, who has practiced immigration law for 35 years. Attorney Cowan was active in the Sanctuary Movement of the 1980's, when churches, schools, and synagogues sheltered refugees fleeing from the war-torn countries of Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. The politics of immigration were as charged back then as they are now and those who sheltered or transported the refugees were subject to prosecution. Fortunately, there was a provision in the interpretation of immigration law that human rights activists grasped as a means to provide humanitarian aid to refugees who were pouring across Arizona's southern border.

Schools, places of worship, and hospitals were and still are considered by Immigrations Enforcement Officials (ICE) as "Sensitive Locations" and ICE officials steer clear of them because of the potential for civilian casualties if an apprehension were to go awry. Placing priority on "the removal of national security, border security, and public safety threats" over that of deporting long-time residents who are undocumented has meant that those whom faith communities, schools, and hospitals would shelter were not generally seen as security risks or

public threats.⁶³ The interpretation of who exactly is a public national or border security or safety threat is left up to ICE officials, but very rarely have these Sensitive Locations been breached in an effort to apprehend either people who are undocumented or those who shelter them.

The Sanctuary Movement began in Tucson in the mid-80s and quickly spread to other parts of the country. Taking the opportunity provided by the Sensitive Location designation, some colleges and faith communities made public declarations of providing shelter in their facilities of refugees fleeing those war-torn countries. Being a Sanctuary designated institution meant press conferences were held in which the identities of those in sanctuary were made known to ICE officials and the general public. At that time, making a public declaration of civil disobedience combined with the relative security of being designated a Sensitive Location allowed refugees safe haven on route to Canada where they were first offered asylum and later to locations in the U.S. where they would be sponsored for asylum here. Only on two occasions during that period in the 80s did the Sanctuary Movement face legal challenges, once in Tucson, Arizona and the other in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Charges against people in both cases were eventually dismissed or overturned and no one served time for the public acts of civil disobedience.

The precedent set by Sanctuary Churches in the eighties was resurrected in 2014 when more aggressive border security measures and immigration enforcement resulted in increasing numbers of the deportations of migrants living without legal papers in the U.S.. Since then,

⁶³ “US Customs and Border Protection Sensitive Locations Page,” Department of Homeland Security, Accessed December 31, 2017. <http://www.bbp.gov/border-security/sensitive-locations-faqs>.

people mired somewhere in the immigration system pipeline who had been living and working in the U.S. for many years, and often had a spouse and/or children who were U.S. citizens, received orders of deportation to leave the country without due process or delay. Some, who had paid attorneys claiming to specialize in immigration law, found out too late that the services they paid for had not been rendered and they faced immediate deportation orders with no access to remediation. Families with children who were U.S. citizens and had lived in Arizona for decades were suddenly torn apart by one or more parent's being deported. Youth who got into any scuffle with the law were deported, despite their having no memory of nor speak the language of their birth country.

With the new administration in 2017, individuals who had been sheltered in Sanctuary churches and eventually granted a stay of deportation, were apprehended at home and work and summarily deported. Some literally left for work and never came home again. No longer was public Sanctuary status protection from deportation if people who had been in Sanctuary were being rounded up and deported after the fact. At least in Arizona, so close to the border where border security is particularly intense, another method had to be found to accompany these families who were living in abject terror of deportation and who no longer had the recourse of going into sanctuary in a local church.

To live in Arizona post 2017, or any state for that matter, is to know and care about people who have been deported. Teachers, students, healthcare, construction, child care, restaurant workers. Homemakers. Small business entrepreneurs. Families sick with the constant fear of deportations. The migrant soup kitchen and women's shelter operated by Catholic Religious women used to see only people who were crossing the border into the U.S. or

recently apprehended and deported. Now the percentage of people who have lived in the U.S. for many years, some who do not speak Spanish and have never known their country of birth, has increased to the point where they are the majority of people attended by those ministries.

Attorney Cowan asked to come to RCUCC to present to our Justice and Witness Ministry Team the pressing needs of these people being ripped from their livelihoods and families. The Ministry Team voted unanimously to investigate the issue further and make a recommendation to Church Council to take the matter under consideration. My Local Advisory Committee sent representatives with members of the Justice and Witness Ministry Team to visit the free legal clinic Attorney Cowan holds in a local high school for those faced with the possibility of immediate deportation. That immersion experience became the third component of this D. Min project, the details of which can be found in the preceding chapter of this paper. This third facilitated immersion encounter resulted in a small but furious group of RCUCC members and friends who felt called to act in the face of such injustice. Once RCUCC members found such injustice and suffering in their own back yards, they became more vigorous in pressing for a bold action by our church in response.

The irony of this response was that, as clergy, I have been outspoken against churches becoming Sanctuary churches and taking on the many responsibilities of sheltering a person or persons. I have seen churches fold in on themselves as the heavy demand on volunteers sapped the missional energy out of the church. The pressure of having a person or family, with all of the inherent needs, worries, emotional and physical health issues, as well as the constant strain of anxiety around a potential breach of the ICE “sensitive area” designation and subsequent legal action against the church and volunteers began to erode trust and faith that this continued to be

the right thing to do. Faith communities who chose to be Sanctuary churches that went through careful and prayerful process to discern such a move found themselves unprepared for the energy and financial strain a year or more of proving sanctuary cost the community. Also, the goal of being Sanctuary churches was not to have several or many in one community, but rather that one would house a person or family, but other faith communities would provide volunteer and financial support. Now in 2017, when Sanctuary was not as viable of an option for churches in Arizona—where people who had been in Sanctuary and gotten stays of deportation were suddenly seeing the Stay reversed and were being summarily deported—how could churches respond in ways that would possibly matter?

I did not think that RCUCC was ready or willing to take on such a challenge. A few in the community had made their suspicions known that my intention behind my D. Min project was to lead the church in civil disobedience of immigration laws. This was not at all the case. I did not imagine where this journey would lead me or the church, but I trusted that the ethic and practice of solidarity would be transforming in some way. As one member said when the issue was brought to a vote of the congregation, “I am excited to see how we will change when we engage at a deeper level” with at-risk and vulnerable people in our community. When Council received Attorney Cowan and heard her testimony of both the suffering and courage of these families, and Council members voted unanimously to support her taking the issue to the congregation for a vote, I was flabbergasted.

I have been surprised and pleased that our ministry of hospitality has not only not sapped energy from the congregation, it has engaged more people at a deeper level of service, which has resulted in a stronger commitment to and energy for ministries with all at-risk and vulnerable

people in our community. RCUCC's Ministry Teams have had increased participation in numbers and availability to Be the Church together. Since I attend all ministry team meetings, I can see that in these six months, RCUCC members and friends have stepped up support for Justice and Witness (which includes a broader spectrum of service projects, including Hospitality), Faith Development, Congregational Life, Personnel, Worship Music and Arts, Labyrinth, and Stewardship and Finance Ministry Teams. Even on Stewardship and Finance, members are more energized to raise funds and see our work together as business and ministry. There is a pervasive sense of "We can do this!" instead of despair over what we can't do. And it is true, money follows vision and mission: we closed our 2017 fiscal year with a surplus of \$21,000!

While I cannot go into detail here about how our church decided to respond to the immediate needs of people facing immediate deportation and separation of families, I can share that a motion to "offer emergency hospitality to at-risk and vulnerable people in our community," passed the congregational vote with only two votes against the proposal. Congregation members gave voice to RCUCC's "DNA" – a commitment that "no matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here." One person chose to leave the church, stating that "This is not Congregational process!" – when it actually was. The other no-vote came from an elderly woman who feared that her age group would be overlooked if we took in "people from the outside." Within a few weeks, as she saw the human face of 'at-risk and vulnerable people' on our campus, she was on board completely.

RCUCC members moved easily from an ethic and theology of solidarity into a relationship in which the church body elected to open our campus to those who needed

emergency safe shelter. But what would we call what we set out to do? Given the commonplace saying by people of Mexican descent in Arizona, “We didn’t cross the border. The border crossed us.” was it presumptuous and even unjust to assume we could or should offer hospitality to a people whose land had been stolen out from under them? Did our use of “Hospitality” project a power dynamic in which we the RCUCC members “owned” the right to share our table, our land, our church?

I recalled a Bible study in Chiapas when indigenous people of Mayan descent came together to study 1 Corinthians: 12:27: “You, then, are the body of Christ, and each of you is a member of it.” Each person took a marker and paper and went out to draw which “member” of the body they were. One returned and had drawn an eyebrow, saying the eyebrow protected the eyes of the body. Another was an ear because the community needed someone to listen carefully should danger arise. Their absolute clarity that their particular “member” was essential to the full function of the body and their humility to assume lesser parts than I had heard people in the U.S. claim reinforced their sense that they often mentioned: “We cannot afford to lose even one member of our community.” Thus “hospitality” with the church would necessarily extend to everyone gathered under the church’s tent if we were to be, indeed, one body.

Yet I also recalled Miguel de la Torre, professor of Social Ethics and Latinx Studies at Iliff School of Theology and his passionate critique of the secular and sacred use of, what he calls, “the rhetoric of hospitality” in the U.S., especially with regard to Latin American migrants and refugees. De la Torre has been a frequent visitor to the Arizona-Sonora, Mexico border with his border studies students. In early 2014, I first heard Dr. de la Torre speak against secular and religious “rhetoric of hospitality” regarding immigration policies and practices. De la Torre

acknowledged the biblical basis for the practice of hospitality that can be found in Hebrew Scripture stories of Abram “the alien” and the Hebrew people’s captivity in Egypt. In the New Testament, he reminded us that Paul encouraged the church of Hebrew Christians in Jerusalem: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it.”⁶⁴ However, De la Torre reminds his listeners that hospitality in scripture is “more than just opening one’s home to the stranger and inviting her in for a meal; hospitality includes justice.” In his book, The U.S. Immigration Crisis: Toward an Ethics of Place, De la Torre writes:

To practice the virtue of hospitality assumes the “house” belongs to the one practicing this virtue who, out of the generosity of their heart, is sharing her or his resources with the Other who has no claim to the possession. But it was due to Latin American natural resources and cheap labor that the U.S. house was built in the first place. The virtue of hospitality masks the complexity caused by the consequences of empire building. . . Rather than speaking about the virtue of hospitality, it would historically be more accurate to speak about the responsibility of restitution.⁶⁵

Members of RCUCC tended to agree with De La Torre’s critique of liberal churches’ emphasis on “the virtue of hospitality. They understood the “virtue” to not be a virtue at all, but a concept loaded with assumptions and biases. But could we possibly use the word hospitality if we acknowledged that the ministry we would provide was not sharing something that was “ours” with “them,” but rather, a ministry we would develop together, assuming that our church property belongs to all of God’s people, and thus it is our responsibility to extend the same

⁶⁴ Hebrews 13:2.

⁶⁵ Miguel A. De La Torre, *The U.S. Immigration Crisis: Toward an Ethics of Place*. Cascade Books, Kindle Edition. 2654-2656.

“extravagant welcome” to our campus as a whole as we do in our church sanctuary. Indeed, didn’t “sanctuary” extend to our entire campus?

The final decision to call the ministry that developed as a result of this D. Min project “Hospitality” came with a visit from Father Conrado Zepeda, a Jesuit priest with whom I served in Chiapas. As originally planned, this project included a ten-day cross-cultural immersion experience with Father Zepeda to southern Chiapas, on the border between Guatemala and Mexico where the Jesuits have three migrant shelters. Due to threats of violence at the shelters by rival gangs fighting for control of the shelters, I decided to shelve the visit and plan one closer to home that was less expensive and time-consuming, without the risk of violence for our church members. But on a trip to the U.S., Father Zepeda came through Tucson and spoke and preached at RCUCC, sharing stories, statistics, and analyses of the migrant crisis between Latin America and the U.S..

Twenty-two members and friends of RCUCC attended his workshop, six of whom had gone on one or more of the immigration immersion experiences in Tucson. One of his slides showed the “Soy Hospitalidad” (I am Hospitality) signs painted on the sides of the migrant shelters where he ministered. When asked why the Jesuits chose that language for their ministry, Father Zepeda said that hospitality became a way of being church, of opening doors, providing shelter, food, medical care, safety, and spiritual support to migrants and refugees on their journey north. While solidarity implied a top-down relationship, hospitality extended the Mexican concept of, “Mi casa es tu casa.” (My house is your house.) That is to say, what is mine is yours. Or perhaps, nothing is either mine or yours, but ours to share as a gift from God.

Volunteers enthusiastically mobilized to furnish two rooms, one for 24/7 accompaniment volunteers, and the other for whomever needed emergency shelter. A group of men who were not entirely on board with the venture got together when they heard we needed “an expensive shower” to counter with an inexpensive option, which we call the “stairway to heaven” because it had to be located a few feet off the floor, above a water and drainage line in the wall. Another room was commandeered and made into a game-room for children and youth as the need arose. A fundraiser brought in an immediate \$3,500 and volunteers came up with a budget for future expenses. We had to figure out food, security, emotional and spiritual support for the family. All of this activity drew in RCUCC members, friends, and family and friends of members. My Pilates instructor and neighbor both volunteered to help. Jane Gelp, an 86 year-old self-proclaimed “rabble rouser”, who has aged out of “active” civil disobedience, volunteered to be the person who called volunteers to remind them of their shifts.

On August 27, 2017, RCUCC welcomed a new family into our community with two special services in which we received the family into membership. (See Appendix B for the full service bulletin.) The services were translated in English and Spanish for the written and spoken word, which tried the patience of some of our members because they were not accustomed to waiting for translation, but the liturgy team wanted to insure that the family could participate fully and understand all that was being said and sung. The text was Exodus 1:10-2:10, the story of Egypt’s Pharaoh’s brutal oppression of the Israelites, and God’s saving and liberating actions through the midwives to the Hebrews, Miriam, and the Pharaoh’s daughter. Our new family wept as they heard the reading and corresponding sermon about God’s saving grace across religious, ethnic, cultural, and economic borders. Words cannot capture the sense of connection and purpose, of Being Church in the Borderlands of Tucson, Arizona.

Five months later, the energy and enthusiasm at RCUCC is unabated. It is often said that church members and friends have come together with our new family to “do something that matters.” At a recent evaluation of our first six months of starting the program, most volunteers elected to “keep it up,” “go deeper,” and “be bolder” in our church’s response to injustice. While a few volunteers wanted a more comfortable bed or a better TV for the accompanists’ room, most expressed a sense of satisfaction at “showing up” for a shift, “taking the risk” to stand with people who live in fear and suffering, and “getting to know others” through their involvement as Hospitality Volunteers. In a time in our country when many are feeling despair and anger over injustices, the act of “showing up” with and for at-risk and vulnerable people in our community has galvanized the RCUCC community at large.

CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSIONS

Implementation of Hospitality Program

“Being Church in the Borderlands: An Exploration of Ministry and Mission of Rincon Congregational United Church of Christ (RCUCC) with Central American Migrants and Refugees” examined the intersection between the global immigration crisis and a closer, more intimate experience of the crisis as a local church in the borderlands between the U.S. and Mexico. This project proposed to build bridges between self-identified people of power and privilege (members of RCUCC) and “people-made-poor” — specifically migrants and refugees forced by economic conditions to enter the U.S. without proper documentation to relocate and work in the U.S. We also sought to know, inasmuch as that is possible, the real-world concerns of migrants and refugees from Central America and better understand why people from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador risked everything to enter the U.S. without proper documentation. Why did children make this perilous journey alone? Why would parents allow or even send their children out on their own? And finally, what are the implications of this massive population shift from the south to the U.S.-Mexico border for our mission and ministry as church?

The specific goals of this project included the following:

- Design, facilitate and evaluate contextual learning immersion experiences for RCUCC members and friends in Arizona and Sonora, Mexico.

- Reflect on the lived realities of migrants and refugee asylum-seekers from Central American countries as read through the lens of the biblical narrative of the “hemorrhaging woman.”
- Develop an understanding of issues surrounding immigration (migrants and asylum-seekers) to the U.S. from Central America.
- Explore the understanding and practice of ministry and mission between our church and refugees and migrants from Central America, developing both language and practices that go beyond “mission” and “ministry” to envision a world in which real and meaningful hands-on relational ministry exists.
- Embody a healing, consoling, liberating ministry and mission at and through RCUCC.

This D. Min research project set out to engage participants and readers in a conversation amongst ourselves, other communities of faith, and migrants and asylum-seekers about the realities and needs of Central American migrants and refugees, especially children. We endeavored to discern what form our ministry would take as we experienced the real-world concerns of this vulnerable population. We explored the theories and practices of *solidarity*, *accompaniment*, *hospitality*, and *sanctuary* with the goal of determining language that takes into account differences in power and privilege and individual and collective agency on both sides of the border, and articulates and embodies a just and compassionate response to the immigration issues that we experienced. We determined, through a careful and prayerful process, to root our understanding of ministry and mission in an ethic and theology of solidarity with vulnerable and

at risk people in our communities, while both experiencing the land, buildings, and other resources of the Church as God's generous hospitality to us as stewards of these gifts, and to create a safe, comfortable and "homey" space to those in immediate need of shelter.

The U.S.-Mexico Jesuit Migrant Ministry's slogan of "Soy Hospitalidad," (I am Hospitality") embodies Jesus' practice of meeting people where they were/are, responding to their needs, and helping to restore them to their God-given potential in community, just as the courage and commitment it took for the woman with the 12-year hemorrhage to cross the border in search of healing. Hospitality then, flows back and forth across geographic, social, economic, and religious borders as a gift from God to be shared generously, just as the body of Christ moved out in all directions to be shared by all humankind, indeed, all of creation.

Who benefits from this?

Dr. Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz's question (Chapter 1, p 15) embraces a continuum of results that begins with a family's immediate release from the fear that had gripped them—that the father and breadwinner of the family would be deported—to years in the future when members and friends of RCUCC continue to discern how God calls us to Be the Church in the borderlands. Our first evaluation of the Hospitality project six months after it was initiated showed that members of the 26-member hospitality team wanted not only to continue our commitment with the families with whom we might serve, but also to "be bolder" and "go deeper" in our understanding of the scriptural imperative and community needs to serve a broader range of people. The group recognized too that we are changing along with the family that joined our church family last Fall. We understand the culture and context from which they come. We see the human face of suffering caused by our punitive and exploitative immigration system. We

know them as family, and because of this, we are not only willing, but are also driven, to help in any way that we can.

On the other side of this D. Min project, through which the Hospitality Project emerged, is the family of the “at-risk and vulnerable” person we have accompanied since the fall. At my initial interview with the family, the three children, ages 14 to 16, expressed fears that RCUCC members and friends would take them in out of pity. The eldest child said, “We are people, just like you, and we are working so hard to live, just like you.” Meanwhile other family members wept so hard it was difficult for them to speak. The kids said that they lived with a huge secret that they couldn’t tell anyone, that their family could be torn apart at any moment. The father added that he was sorry his family had to endure such fear and the separation that lay ahead. It was a conversation laden with tears and riven by fear.

Two months later the middle daughter celebrated her Quinceañera—her 15th birthday—which is usually a huge celebration akin to a debutante ball in our culture. Because of their situation, the family expected to have a small quiet gathering. The kids were fearful of telling their friends and a little embarrassed that the party would be at a church where few spoke Spanish. But as the decorations were going up, plate after plate of food arrived. Aunts, uncles, grandparents, other men who had received stays of deportation and who wanted to encourage our family, arrived with gifts. The friends of the teens arrived, dressed to the nines. Because the family had said the party would be small and invited only me, church members could not witness the exuberant joy of that evening. When the birthday daughter asked me to do a blessing, we gathered in a circle and I invited every person to shower her with blessing. Her dad finished the blessing, sobbing out his sadness that the celebration had to take place under cover of darkness

and secrecy. The birthday girl gathered herself and stood tall, as she asked if we could sing the benediction we always sing at the end of each service:

Lord prepare me/to be a sanctuary/ pure and holy/ tried and true.

With thanksgiving/ I'll be a living/ sanctuary/for you.

Make us aware we/ are sanctuary/ each made holy/ loved right through.

With thanksgiving/ we are a living/ sanctuary/for you.

And then she asked people to repeat what we say after that: “We need each other to survive. We need each other to thrive.” I knew then that we had changed, grown together as family as it is surely meant to be, on earth, as in heaven.

This past month, one family member began participating in English as a second language classes offered at RCUCC by a local non-profit. The teacher reports that in just one month, he has gained a proficiency with English that exceeds that of the other students, an achievement that has significantly raised his morale and offers better opportunities for employment in his future. As he learns English, he can better engage with RCUCC members and friends as friendships deepen and knowledge of the “other” grows on both sides. The family too has thoroughly integrated into the life of community, from sharing hospitality for fellowship after worship, attending groups and classes at the church, participating in ministry teams, worship service projects and community life.

I have learned through this project that the process of discernment and design of spiritual “building blocks” for a faith community is an essential element for followers of Jesus. In this

project, one block was language. From the start, members of the LAC and I began to question language. We determined that “mission” has been an activity of the church that was often exploitative, unidirectional and carried unexamined assumptions and privilege into relationships between communities with diverse economic, spiritual, and social experiences. We chose not to focus on critiquing and reinterpreting mission, and instead focused on ministry, especially Jesus’ ministry on earth, that embodied a discipleship of equals in which all involved exercised their own agency to one degree or another and assumed transformation of the actors and their communities. We chose, rather, to see the issues of immigration through both study and mini immersion experiences, to judge or reflect on these issues through ethical and theological lenses, and to act by becoming more intentional about immigration issues in our own communities by visiting faith-based projects that were designed to address immediate needs of migrants and asylum-seekers and advocating for systemic change. Meanwhile, the practice of conscientization required that we, members and friends of RCUCC, examine our power and privilege in relationship with those with whom we minister. Conscientization is a life-long process, a steady peeling back layers of privilege to discover what divides and connects us, and to lean into the latter.

I have learned the value of planning the project phase while being open to outcome, trusting God to show up in the mix and lead us to the next rights steps in ministry. While the project design originally included a delegation to southern Mexico, due to time and cost restraints and safety issues, we opted to stay closer to home, but found, in doing so, that what we would have experienced by traveling over a thousand miles is also happening in the midst of our own community. We also began this project with concern for the youth with whom I ministered at the Southwest Key Detention Center. But we realized that we could best help the children by

focusing on families that were threatened with separation, jail time, deportation, and even death. The children of the family that joined our church, who were not doing well in school when they first came to us, are thriving. The mantle of fear under which this family lived has been lifted, at least temporarily. Their joy and ours is transformational.

While our original plan for this D. Min project was to explore “ministry and mission” of RCUCC with Central American migrants and Refugees,” we found our focus drawn to a broader understanding of ministry, to a borderland ecclesiology that included every aspect of “Being the Church.” We began to see that the “product” of this D. Min “Being Church in the Borderlands” project extended to everything we did as church, from small group work, to worship, to our use of our land and facilities, to service opportunities, to the stewardship of our resources – to our embodied practice of being the “hands and Feet, body and breath of Christ” here on earth. In coming to see the historical Jesus’ ministry from baptism to execution in Jerusalem, we realized that he never separated mission from ministry. Ministry on individual and communal levels is mission, and vice versa. Jesus went, preached, and taught, healed and cast out demons and moved on in ever widening circles. He started with doing. He called disciples and took them along with him to see and do what he did. Being God’s Good News is to immerse in community, to transform and be transform through the experience, and then get up and take the next right step in ministry together. We are never the same. With each step we take, we are both transformed and transforming. Thus our use of language, understanding of ourselves, God and neighbor, our cultural competence and compassion, and our own understanding of ourselves as God’s Beloved grows and extends beyond our individual bodies and church. An ecclesiology of the borderlands engages and celebrates difference, champions justice for all of God’s people, and gathers life and soul-saving force. In these times in which church is diluted into lukewarm

practices meant more to ensure the comfort of worshipers than to transform the world, an ecclesiology of the borderlands reminds us of Jesus' ministry at the borders of human understanding and draws our attention back to embodied engagement.

For me personally, these four years of study, research, and writing have been revitalizing and re-grounding in my ministry at RCUCC and beyond. I am a better writer, more self-confident in the stories I have been called to carry as a bearer of God's Good News. At 67, my life has taken on shapes I never imagined. I went into the D. Min program married and came out divorced and happily single. I bought a house. I learned that living with passion and joy creates more time, not less. There was always enough time to lead a church of three hundred people, to preach, teach, provide pastoral care and prophetic witness, to serve as pastor and prophet beyond RCUCC, and to have a life, a good life.

I notice within myself and members of our community, that we are braver and more confident that we can Be the Church in ministries that save souls and lives. Knowing that we are engaged in a ministry of hospitality helps us to stand in this society gone mad over power, consumption, and greed. Despite the results of the presidential election of 2016, we are a just and joyful congregation. We provided 24-hour, seven-days-a-week coverage for the Hospitality Program, while continuing to serve people in the LGBTQ, homeless adults and youth on their own, mentally and physically disabled, and elderly communities. Book and Bible studies, confirmation classes, Twelve Step and TransParent programs, labyrinth ministry, and robust fellowship and church leadership punctuate our life together with goodness. My preaching is both more joyful and justice-focused. My energy level remains strong, even as the demands on me as Senior Pastor have increased. I feel more resilient, more able to move from life to death to

life without being bent double by the hard work of ministry. I am deeply grateful for the respect and support I have experienced from RCUCC members and friends.

When I graduate this May, my church will forgive the \$20,000 loan I incurred to pay for my studies. I have felt God's hand in the midst of my studies and collegial relationships. I have needed to find spiritual depth and intellectual rigor which I had not experienced before in order to get through this D. Min process, and these newfound strengths will go forward with me. I am happy to have led the church Godward, and happy for my own ongoing transformation with church members, friends and our hospitality guests. I encourage anyone who reads these words and wants to know more to contact me directly for more information. And I thank you, dear readers, at the end of this time spent, for witnessing to this precious calling to Be the Church in the Borderlands.

APPENDICES

A. Program for Contextual Immersion Learning Experiences: Rincon Congregational United Church of Christ

January 17, 2017: The Inn Project, Christ United Methodist Church, Tucson Program:

| | |
|----------------|---|
| 1:30 am | Meet at church, sign in, short introductions, and orientation |
| 2:00 pm | Carpool short distance to Christ United Methodist Church |
| 2:15 – 3:15 pm | Orientation to the shelter and volunteer opportunities |
| 3:15 – 4:00 pm | Translated encounter with Andrea, Nereda, and Flo |
| 4:00 – 5:00 pm | Debrief |

April 4, 2017: Kino Border Initiative (KBI) - A full-day visit to Nogales, Sonora, Mexico with the Jesuit binational organization dedicated to help make humane, just, workable migration between the U.S. and Mexico a reality. They provide direct assistance and accompaniment of migrants, social and pastoral care of communities on both sides of the border, and research and advocacy to transform U.S. immigration policy and practice. KBI is a joint project of The California Province of the Society of Jesus, Jesuit Refugee Services/US, The Missionary Sisters of the Eucharist, The Mexican Province of the Society of Jesus, the Catholic Diocese of Tucson and of Hermosillo, Sonora, Mexico. The Nazareth House women's shelter and the *comedor* (soup kitchen) are staffed by volunteers from the local area and around the world who come from diverse backgrounds, ages, and abilities, with many from inter-religious settings.

Program

- 11:30 am** Group meets for introductions and orientation
- 12:15 am** Depart from church to go to the Mariposa port of entry
- 2:00 pm** Meet Kino Border Initiative Assistant Director of Education,
Rev. Pete Neely, S.J.
- 2:30 pm** Walk across the border to the Nazareth House Women's Shelter and
meet with Sister Cecilia and women migrants
- 3:30 pm** Walk to the *comedor*, the soup kitchen for migrants operated by the
KBI and Missionary Sisters of the Eucharist
- 7:00 pm** Back in Tucson, dinner together at the Guadalajara Mexican
Restaurant

April 27, 2017: “Keep Tucson Together” a Tucson non-profit and free legal clinic at Pueblo High School– A free legal clinic designed to provide legal support to members of protection networks and the community at large. Keep Tucson Together works with volunteer attorneys and faith communities to create a network of resources for vulnerable and at-risk families.

Plan

- 5:00 pm** Meet in parking lot at Pueblo High School in South Tucson
- 5:30 pm** Gather in cafeteria to learn about program to help people fill out papers for citizenship, and to meet with attorneys for orientation to strategies to avoid deportation
- 6:30 pm** Meet with people at risk of deportation
- 7:30 pm** Debrief outside the cafeteria

B. Worship Service to Initiate RCUCC's Hospitality Program

A Way Out of No Way

August 27, 2017

Rincon Congregational United Church of Christ

*Is it not true that God needs human hands to wield the instruments through which healing is done, and human eyes to look in compassion on the outcast, and a human presence to stand by the lonely, and human brain-power to make deserts fertile and feed the hungry? And human political skills to fight for a just and a humane social order? Is it not functionally true? – Collin Morris in *Encountering Others* (p 52)*

Introit: All Are Welcome – Marty Haugan

Hymn: For the Healing of the Nations

CALL TO WORSHIP

Welcome to the church family!

Welcome to all cultures and ethnicities, languages and locations!

Welcome to the church family!

Welcome to all abilities and ages, young and old and in-between!

Welcome to the church family!

Welcome to single people and couples, grandparents, foster parents, aunts and uncles, siblings, and friends!

Welcome to the church family!

Welcome to all people of different sexual orientations and gender identities, all people made in God's image!

Welcome to the church family!

Welcome to everyone who is seeking relationship with God by being in relationship with each other.

Come, let us worship as God's family!

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

Let us begin by recalling the words of Cesar Chavez: "Every time we sit at a table at night or in the morning to enjoy the fruits and grain and vegetables from our good earth, remember that they come from the work of men and women and children who have been exploited for generations."

Almighty God, too often we don't pay attention, we don't stop to think that, even in this day and age, injustice remains an invisible ingredient in much of the

food that we eat. Shake us awake, O God, open our eyes to see our power and obligation as consumers to help put things right. Justice demands it. Love demands it.

Our God is a God of grace and transformation. When we ask, God will give us the courage and strength to live out our faith in the workplace and the marketplace, as well as in the sanctuary. Amen.

READINGS Exodus 1:10-2:10

A new Pharaoh—one who did not know Joseph—came to power in Egypt, Pharaoh said to the Egyptians, “Look at how powerful the Israelites have become, and how they outnumber us! We need to deal shrewdly with their increase, against a time of war when they might turn against us and join our enemy, and so escape out of the country.” So they oppressed the Israelites with overseers who put them to forced labor; and with them they built the storage cities of Pitom and Ra’amses. Yet the more the Israelites were oppressed, the more they multiplied and burst forth, until the Egyptians dreaded the Israelites. So they made the Israelites utterly subservient with hard labor, brick-and mortar work, and every kind of field work. The Egyptians were merciless in subjugating them with crushing labor. Pharaoh spoke to the midwives of the Hebrews—one was Shiprah, and the other Puah—and said, “When you assist the Hebrew women in childbirth, examine them on the birthing-stool. If the baby is a boy, kill it. If it is a girl, let it live.” But the midwives were God-fearing women, and they ignored the Pharaoh’s instructions, and let the male babies live. So Pharaoh summoned the midwives and asked why they let the male babies live. The midwives responded, “These Hebrew women are different from Egyptian women; they are more robust, and deliver even before the midwife arrives.” God rewarded the midwives, and the people increased in numbers and in power. And since the midwives were God-fearing, God gave them families of their own. The Pharaoh then commanded all those in Egypt, “Let every boy that is born to the Hebrews be thrown into the Nile, but let every girl live.”

There was a man from the house of Levi who had married a Levite woman, and she conceived and gave birth to a boy. And she saw that the baby was good, so she hid it for three months. When she could hide the baby no longer she took a papyrus basket, daubed it with bitumen and pitch, and put the child in it, and placed the basket among the reeds by the banks of the Nile. The baby’s sister watched from a distance to learn what would happen. Pharaoh’s daughter came down to the Nile to bathe, while her attendants walked along the river bank. She noticed the basket among the reeds, and sent her attendant to fetch it. Opening it, she saw the baby—and how it wept! She was moved to pity and said, “This must be one of the Hebrews’ children!” Then his sister said to Pharaoh’s daughter, “Do you want me to go and find a nurse for you among the Hebrews to suckle the child for you?” “Yes, go,” she answered. So the sister went off and brought the baby’s own mother. Pharaoh’s daughter said to her, “Take this child with you and suckle it for me, and I myself will pay you.” The woman took the child and nursed it. After the child was weaned, she brought it to Pharaoh’s daughter, who adopted it as her

own. She called him Moses—“ The One Who Pulls Out”—for she said, “I pulled him out of the water.”

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