

Time Now to Reconnect & Recommit

Epiphany 2022

Dear Friends in Christ,

Epiphany greetings to all of you in our network of ELCA missionary sponsorship congregations.

We just turned a key page in the church's liturgical calendar – from Christmas to the Epiphany season – giving us the next several weeks to contemplate the mission implications of God's incarnation in the world through Jesus Christ.



This liturgical shift occurs at the same time as other transitions that typically occur at the beginning of January. In Costa Rica, for example, parents are no longer fretting over their children's Christmas wish list; rather, they are now making a list (and calculating the cost) of all that their school-age kids will need for the 2022 school year (begins in February) including, for the first time, the Covid vaccine for younger children between the ages of 5 and 11.

During the holidays between Christmas and New Year's, I tried to disconnect mentally to reflect on all that transpired over the past year as a prelude to tackling the challenges of the new year. Now, it's time to reconnect.

In that spirit, let's start with what I consider the principal highlight of 2021. Enduring the 2nd year of the Covid pandemic was better than the first thanks to the opportunity to travel a bit.

Marta & I took advantage of a lull between successive waves of the pandemic for a weekend getaway in a part of Costa Rica where the local tourism industry has been hit hard. That was our first trip. Then, in late August, I made a 3-week trip to the East Coast to spend time with my mother, just in time for her 95th birthday. That was my first international travel experience in the Covid era.

In December, I made my first AMMPARO-related trip outside of Costa Rica since the beginning of the pandemic. It was a 12-day trip which originated in Mexico City and ended in Tapachula, along Mexico's southwest border with Guatemala.

I have to say that the Mexico trip left me with really mixed emotions. For sure, it was a real high point to meet face-to-face with the leadership of ELCA's AMMPARO companions in Mexico after 2 years of communicating exclusively via a computer screen.

On the other hand, what the other six members of our delegation and I heard and saw about the inhumane treatment that migrants and refugees are receiving in Mexico was extremely disturbing. Here is a summary of what we learned during our 6-day visit:

1. After a downturn during the first year of the pandemic, the number of migrants and refugees is surging again. Beyond the continuing flow of migrant families from Central America, Mexico is also receiving unprecedented numbers of migrants from Cuba, Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Haiti, reflecting the profound political and economic crises in each of those countries.

2. The Mexican agencies that could respond in the most humane fashion to the current situation, particularly the Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance (COMAR), are understaffed & underfunded. Instead, under pressure from the U.S. government, the Mexican government has opted to respond with a policy of contention and confinement, leaving tens of thousands of migrants stranded at different points throughout the country. Media images in the U.S. have focused on migrants living in makeshift dwellings along the U.S.-Mexico border. In truth, there are more migrants languishing in the greater Tapachula area which is the first major population center that you reach after entering Mexico from Guatemala.

3. To legally continue their journey north from Tapachula, migrants and refugees need some sort of immigration permit. For most of 2021, the only alternative offered to them was to file an asylum claim. Nearly 55,000 people began that process with COMAR during a critical two-month period in the fall. Next comes a two-month wait for the chance to present their case. After that, it will take at least that long for COMAR to decide the merits of each case. During the long wait, anyone with a pending asylum case must remain in the Tapachula area. The logical result is that the migrant population has swollen to unmanageable proportions. UN officials told us that the current migrant population in Tapachula is nearing 100,000 which has led to a critical shortage of housing. Migrants have no access to health care or education, nor can they earn money through employment except for poorly-paid day jobs in the informal

economy. Basically, they're living in the street and surviving as best they can.

4. Within the population of in-transit migrants that pass through Tapachula, certain nationality groups have always been treated worse than others. Until mid-2021, indigenous Guatemalans received the worst treatment because of their easily identifiable racial characteristics and language limitations (many do not speak Spanish, especially women and girls). Today, the group that is treated even worse are Haitians and other migrants of African descent. Like other migrants, Haitians are desperate to leave the Tapachula area as soon as possible. They have pleaded with key government offices to speed up the processing of their asylum claims. In late August, some attempted to leave Tapachula in an organized caravan which was immediately broken up by Mexican immigration, military, and police authorities. The level of violence employed to stop this caravan of Black migrant families was just as disturbing as the images from Del Rio, TX a few weeks later.

5. The population of stranded migrants in Tapachula has generated a backlash among a local population accustomed to migrants passing thru their community, but nothing on the scale of the current situation. In late November, the Mexican



Warning from a neighborhood vigilante group to residents of a church-operated migrant shelter in Tapachula, including large numbers of Haitians: "If we catch you, we will LYNCH you."

immigration agency (INM) finally responded with an ad hoc plan to "depressurize" the situation. An unspecified number of migrants would be given safe passage to travel on buses to 15+ communities further north in Mexico. While a reasonable idea in theory, the lack of logistical planning created a humanitarian nightmare.

Thousands of migrants – virtually all of African descent – had to line up along the edge of a highway on the outskirts of Tapachula to receive a special bus pass. On the first day that we visited this site, we were told that the wait was several days. The conditions were deplorable. No shelter from the hot sun and rain except plastic sheets and umbrellas; no bathroom facilities; no food or drinking water.

When I returned to Costa Rica, it was hard to get the image of this long line of migrants out of my mind. Then, I remembered the words of the coordinator of the Migrant Ministry Program of the Mexican Lutheran Church (ILM) at the beginning of Epiphany exactly a year ago:

"In times of so much darkness, to follow the light of Jesus and to put our gifts and talents at His service, brings light to the lives of those in need. Through our actions, we illuminate the paths of people who are migrants."

That's the common call to mission which we share with the committed leadership of our network of AMMPARO companions in Mexico and elsewhere in Latin America.



Dec. 10 encounter between AMMPARO delegates & key members of the "Grupo de Trabajo sobre Política Migratoria" (GTPM) in Mexico City

I extend the same invitation to you during this Epiphany season. In addition to your missionary sponsorship support, connect with our AMMPARO companions and your siblings, congregations and synods who are part of ELCA's AMMPARO network.

You can learn more by following these links:

www.elca.org/AMMPARO or
www.elca.org/advocacy or
Facebook.com/ELCAammparo

With peace,

Stephen Deal
ELCA Missionary
San José, Costa Rica

