

Report on the
Religious Leaders' Delegation to Mexico
Mexico-U.S. Advocates Network

January 30-February 2, 2002
Mexico, D.F. Mexico

Introduction

Over the past three years, the Mexico-U.S. Advocates Network, coordinated by Sin Fronteras, IAP in Mexico, and the Heartland Alliance for Human Needs & Human Rights in the U.S., has convened annual meetings and interim exchange visits of U.S. and Mexican advocates to explore their shared concerns relating to migration policy and its impact on people on both sides of the border. The on-going dialogue which has emerged from these gatherings has created a community of activists who understand that Mexico to U.S. migration is a complex phenomenon, and that the human rights and welfare of those involved can only be addressed by binational approaches. In late 2000, members of the Mexico-U.S. Advocates Network identified the religious and labor communities as two civil society sectors with which it hoped to collaborate more closely in its binational advocacy work. With support from the Ford Foundation, Mexico-U.S. Advocates staff began the process of planning a delegation to Mexico for national leaders in each of these two communities.

The Mexico-U.S. Advocates Network's engagement with the labor community took on a different form than had been envisioned in late 2000; representatives of many of the large service unions in the U.S. initiated their own process of alliance-building with colleagues and other civil society representatives in Mexico and Central America. In August of 2001, Mexico-U.S. Advocates Network Director Oscar Chacón accompanied a delegation of high-level labor leaders on a tour of Central America.

However, plans for the religious delegation proceeded as anticipated. Heartland Alliance staff turned to the already-established forum of the U.S. Church Consultation on Migration as a base for its delegation participant list. This U.S. Church Consultation, composed of U.S. participants in the broader North American Consultation of Churches, initially focused largely on refugee issues. At a January 2001 gathering of the Consultation, Mexico-U.S. Advocates representatives proposed a broadened focus for the group that would incorporate migration and human rights issues as well. When the U.S. Consultation on Migration met again in May 2001, Heartland Alliance staff presented the idea for the religious delegation to participants as an opportunity for education about the root causes of Mexico-U.S. migration and as chance to initiate a dialogue with Mexican religious colleagues about potential binational advocacy on policy issues.

Over the next several months, the list of U.S. delegation participants expanded to include several members of the U.S. Church Consultation on Migration and other representatives of national church bodies. The goals for the delegation were defined as follows:

- 1) to acquaint U.S. religious leaders with the political, economic, and social factors which influence the high levels of undocumented migration from Mexico to the U.S.;
- 2) to introduce U.S. religious leaders to the perspectives of a wide range of Mexicans concerned with the causes and impact of Mexico-U.S. and Central American migration; and
- 3) to develop a dialogue between U.S. religious leaders and colleagues in Mexico from faith-based organizations and other civil society organizations which are concerned with the human and labor rights of migrants, as well as with ameliorating the social and economic conditions which spawn migration.

On January 30, 2002, U.S. participants gathered in Mexico City to begin their delegation. Over the next three days, they met with their Mexican counterparts, listened to presentations of experts on various aspects of the Mexico-U.S. migration relationship, visited a migrant-sending community in the state of Puebla, and engaged one another in conversation about how the religious community could most effectively uphold its spiritual mandate to stand with the sojourner in the context of Mexico-U.S. migration policy debates.

Participant List

Harriet Bicksler, Mennonite Central Committee
Pastor Eduardo Carrillo, Comisión Nacional de Asuntos Migratorios
Ralston Deffenbauh, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service
Ken Fealing, United Methodist Church-General Board of Church and Society
Sister Charlotte Hobelman, U.S. Catholic Conference of Bishops
Reverend Robin Hoover, Humane Borders
Dot Ivey, Church World Service
Richard Kerner, Episcopal Migration Ministries
Elaine Klemen, United Church of Christ, Chicago Metropolitan Association
Obispo Gabriel Lozzada Valdez, Iglesia Metodista de Mexico, Conferencia Norte
Central
Joan Maruskin, Church World Service
Maureen Master, U.S. Catholic Conference of Bishops
Sue Sattler, Immaculate Heart of Mary
Janna Shaddock-Hernández, American Friends Service Committee
Annie Wilson, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service
Rebeca Yoder, Mennonite Central Committee

Expert Presentations

On the morning of January 31st, participants gathered to listen to a panel of experts discuss the state of human rights and migration policy in Mexico. The panel included Manuel Canto Choc, president of the Citizens Movement for Democracy; Jeff Hermanson, representative of the AFL-CIO Center for Labor Solidarity in Mexico; Rodolfo Garcia Zamora, professor at the Universidad de Zacatecas, and Gretchen Kuhner, director of the refugee and asylum program at Sin Fronteras, IAP.

Manuel Canto Choc gave a general overview of the process of democratization and the status of human rights in Mexico. He emphasized that although the election of PAN candidate Vicente Fox in July 2000 represented a tremendous political shift after 70 years of PRI rule, the major change in actual policies one would expect to be associated with such a transformation has yet to be realized. Although respect for civil and political rights in Mexico is growing, the social, cultural, and economic rights of Mexican citizens are increasingly violated. Canto Choc noted that although President Fox promised to work with the Zapatista movement to resolve the conflict in Chiapas, these efforts have been unsuccessful because the government continues to deal with the situation as a purely political one, instead of addressing the social and economic conditions from which it arose.

Jeff Hermanson discussed the economic opportunities for workers in the current “globalizing” Mexican economy. Over the past twenty years, as the Mexican government has pursued free market reforms, the living standard of Mexican citizens has been cut in half. The most dynamic sector of the Mexican economy is the export sector – in particular, manufacturing exports. One million Mexicans work in foreign owned maquiladoras, many of which pay substandard wages and subject workers to various forms of exploitation. Historically strong sectors of the Mexican economy – especially agricultural ones like the sugar cane industry and corn farming – have been hit hardest by free trade agreements like NAFTA. Hermanson observed that there is reason for optimism, however; recent improvements in civil and political rights, many of which have come about as a result of international pressure, have created some space for much-needed advancements in labor, economic, and social rights.

Rodolfo García Zamora discussed rural migration to the U.S. from Mexico and the impact of remittances on economic development in rural regions. He noted that there is no state policy to address the lack of economic opportunities for rural Mexicans, and that this is a significant factor propelling emigration. Family and social networks facilitate the process of migration to the U.S. One in five Mexican households have family members in the receive money from remittances. He cited the case of Zacatecas as reflective of the southern Mexican experience with migration. 85% of the state budget in Zacatecas comes from remittances. He noted that state governments in Mexico are increasingly attempting to harness part of remittance flows for state-funded development projects. There have been three examples of this type of program; one in Guanajuato, one in Jalisco, and one in Zacatecas. The government in Zacatecas continues to ask migrants to send more and more of their remittances to the government itself, as though it were the responsibility of the migrants, not the state, to finance economic development projects. Ultimately, he

asserted, the Mexican government has not developed comprehensive set of policies to address the phenomenon of migration and the economic development issues that underlay it. Finally, Garcia Zamora presented the proposal that he and others have developed for rural re-development in Zacatecas, Mexico.

Gretchen Kuhner discussed Mexico's immigration and refugee policies. Mexico receives approximately 250-300 refugee applications per year. There are far more refugees residing in the country, but since most of them are hoping to get to the U.S., they do not want to apply for refugee status in Mexico. Although Mexico has signed onto the Refugee Convention, it has not been implemented. The government developed regulations for refugee eligibility in 2000, but those also have not been implemented; for now, refugee eligibility is determined by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) office in Mexico. The UNHCR is trying to encourage the Mexican government to take over the process of determining eligibility. 80% of refugee applicants are held in detention. All extra-regional migrants in Mexico are held in the detention facility in Mexico City.

Press Conference

In the middle of the day on January 31st, Religious Delegation participants hosted a press conference at the Movimiento Ciudadano por la Democracia (MCD). A number of representatives of Mexican media outlets attended the conference and pressed participants on their organizations' stances on migration policy concerns, as well as their personal perspectives on binational migration issues. The press conference resulted in coverage of the delegation in several Mexican newspapers.

Mexican Religious Leaders Presentations

During the afternoon of January 31st, U.S. participants gathered with Mexican colleagues to listen to presentations on examples of ministry in action. Mexican religious leaders spoke about their work in the areas of human rights and migration, providing delegation participants with further analysis of the socio-political reality and migration phenomenon in Mexico, and offering their own reflections on the theological basis of their work. The speakers were Edgar Cortez from the Jesuit-based Miguel Agustín Pro Juárez Human Rights Center (PRODH); Padre Vladimiro Valdes, a Jesuit priest completing his thesis on migration from Central America to Mexico; El Padre Flor Maria, a Scalibrini priest who runs a Casa del Migrante (Migrant Shelter) in Tapachula, Chiapas; and Pastor Eduardo Carrillo, a Methodist minister who coordinates the work of the Mexican Methodist Committee on Migration.

Edgar Cortez, Director of the PRODH, outlined four fundamental areas of concern with respect to human rights in Mexico and highlighted their relationship to migration. First, he noted, there is a crisis of Mexico's judicial system – of every ten cases regarding human rights violations which are investigated, only one is concluded. There are high levels of

impunity with regard to the actions of governmental officials. Second, the rights of indigenous people in Mexico are consistently violated. The third major area of concern to human rights advocates in Mexico is militarization – the military has a presence in many areas of political and civil life where it should not. The current attorney general of Mexico is a former military General. The military is heavily involved in police issues such as narcotrafficking and migration control. El Plan Sur, the initiative implemented in the summer of 2001 with the aim of cracking down on undocumented migration across Mexico's southern border, involves the use of military personnel. The fourth issue he highlighted is the widespread violation of the social and economic rights of Mexican citizens. The violation of these rights is often a major factor in contributing to emigration. He noted that there are two groups of particular concern to human rights advocates in Mexico: vulnerable groups, and indigenous people. Both these groups tend to send large numbers of people towards the U.S.

Vladimiro Valdes, a Jesuit priest who worked with Salvadoran refugees during the 1980s and who is now completing a thesis on undocumented migration, spoke next. He presented a panorama of the structural forces that shape undocumented migration throughout North and Central America. He noted that migration between the U.S. and Mexico continues in spite of the U.S.'s ostensible efforts to stop it, because of the symmetry between the needs of the U.S. economy and the weaknesses of the Mexican economy. Migration continues because it follows the demands of the free market. Governmental attempts to contain and control the flow of migrants across national borders do not stop migration flows; they merely serve to criminalize migration. This criminalization of movement across international borders creates a structure of vulnerability in which migrants are trapped from the moment they leave their homes until the moment they become legal residents of another country. For the U.S. and Mexican governments to comprehensively address this problem, they must deal with it as a binational issue, and they must work together to implement social programs to address it.

Padre Flor Maria Rigoni, a Scalibrini priest who runs a migrant house in Chiapas, Mexico, spoke next. He discussed the need to frame the issue of migration as a human issue, which – as people of God – members of the religious community are compelled to respond to. He spoke about the fact that Mexico is trying to apply to its southern border the same policies that the U.S. has used on its southern border – and the result is, predictably, that migrants are encountering greater risks, extortion, and even death. He called on all in the room to resist the temptation to dismiss the problems of migrants as “other people's” problems, and to embrace and address the pain and vulnerability of migrants as suffering that affects all humanity.

Finally, Reverend Eduardo Carrillo, a pastor with the United Methodist Church in Mexico, who coordinates the migration program of the Mexican Methodist Church, spoke. The Mexican Methodists run a number of shelters for migrants along the northern border – most of these shelters are simply converted churches. Reverend Carrillo discussed the spiritual mandate which compels the church tend to people who are

suffering, and spoke in particular of the vulnerability of women migrants and residents of northern border cities.

Trip to Puebla and Subsequent Reflections

On Friday, February 1, delegation participants traveled to the town of Coyula in the municipality of Atlixco, Puebla. The visit was coordinated by Marcela Ibarra, coordinator of the Migration Program, an innovative community-university partnership based at the Ibero-American University in Puebla. The Migration Program conducts research on several towns in the state experiencing high levels of emigration and coordinates capacity-building trainings intended to promote community-based development in those towns.

Upon arrival, delegation participants went on a tour of Coyula, visiting the town church, a community medical center, the home of a family with significant migratory experience in the U.S., and a secondary school. Through conversations with the community members who had migrated to the U.S. and with the children in the school – nearly all of whom had family members in the New York City and northern New Jersey area – participants were exposed to the human dimension of the phenomenon they had explored at an intellectual level the day before.

After returning from the trip to Puebla, delegation participants gathered over dinner to discuss and process the day's experiences. Many delegates were particularly struck by the children in a class they had visited in Coyula, all of whom had raised their hands in response to questions about who among them had family in the U.S. and who among them would like to go to the U.S. one day. This poignant incident illuminated for many participants the powerful appeal that the prospect of a journey towards the U.S. holds for many in Mexican society, and served to reinforce the inevitability of future migratory flows towards the north.

Delegates noted that the visit, along with the presentations they heard the day before, had made them aware of the global dimension of the issue of migration, and had pressed upon them a need to consider that dimension in their own advocacy work on the immigration policy in the U.S. Several suggested that shifting from the use of the term "immigration" to the term "migration" would reflect their increasingly international understanding of what has been dealt with in the U.S. largely as a domestic phenomenon. They spoke of the need to communicate and collaborate with the international economic development branches or divisions of their respective faith-based organizations, and ultimately, to address the global economic inequalities which are at the heart of migration flows.

Participants mentioned that the visit to Coyula had served to highlight the glaring disconnect between U.S. immigration laws and the realities of the Mexico-U.S. migratory relationship. As long as there are people in Mexico like the residents of Coyula who are

willing to work, and U.S. employers looking to hire them, migration will continue. Like Prohibition Laws in the 1920s, U.S. immigration laws are needlessly forcing a widespread social activity underground, making it riskier and costlier for all involved. The approximately \$1,500 that migrants from Coyula pay to smugglers every time they take a trip amounts to a huge financial drain from a community that could use the money to address critical infrastructure needs.

Participants also discussed the U.S. church/ faith community response to the phenomenon of undocumented Mexico-U.S. migration. The issue, they noted, resonates closely with the theological principles – central to many faith traditions – to welcome the stranger and provide shelter to the sojourner. Observing that the issue of migration is generally dealt with in the U.S. from legal and political perspectives, several participants suggested that it is the responsibility of the church community to articulate a common voice speaking to the moral ramifications of migration control policies.

The group identified three general sectors it wanted to expose to the realities experienced in Mexico: church members/ the general public in the U.S.; leadership within church bodies, and policymakers. Participants discussed the idea of a collective Lobbying Day on Capitol Hill, a subsequent retreat to consider future directions for the group, and the development of an inventory of faith-based services offered to migrants throughout the U.S.

Concluding Discussion

On Saturday, February 2, the final day of the delegation, participants met again with several Mexican counterparts to develop strategies for future joint action. Despite the high levels of individual commitment to further joint work and action expressed by Mexican and U.S. participants, there was significant discussion of the obstacles that must be overcome before that future collaborative action within and between faith communities in both countries is realized.

Representatives of Mexican faith bodies stated that there are a number of challenges to ecumenical work in Mexico, and that Mexican church bodies do not have the institutional history of collaborating on policy issues that does exist in the U.S. They also noted that Mexican civil society in general has been dispersed and not well-coordinated with regard to migration and human rights, and that within the faith community in particular, there is no existent space or forum to discuss or address these issues.

While U.S. participants acknowledged that there is some history of ecumenical discussion and collaboration around migration issues (through forums such as the U.S. Church Consultation on Migration) in the U.S., they also felt that there are a number of challenges to future collaboration and work. In spite of attempts to consolidate the North American and the U.S. Church Consultation on Migration, the future of these forums remains uncertain. Additionally, the staff leadership of faith-based agencies working on

migration issues is almost entirely dominated by non-immigrants; participants recognized that this reality represents a structural problem in their work.

Drawing from several of the common areas of concern articulated at the June 2001 meeting of the Church Consultation on Migration and in conference calls preceding the Mexico delegation, participants listed the following as priorities for their coordinated policy advocacy work:

- 1.) to advocate for a just and safe U.S. border policy;
- 2.) to enable/empower migrants in the U.S. by providing them with essential services;
- 3.) to advocate for the legalization of undocumented migrants in the U.S.;
- 4.) to push fair and functional immigration policies that benefit the migrant sending and receiving countries;
- 5.) to address migration as an international phenomenon; and
- 6.) to reconcile the fields of migration and international economic development.

On a broader level, participants spoke of the need to develop a new ecumenical message that responds to the new globalized and transnational context in which we live. They spoke of the need to develop the capacity of churches in sending countries in order to be able to question and offer alternatives to the issue of extreme structural poverty.

Providing that it has the resources to do so, Heartland Alliance's International Program will work to continue to facilitate communication and mutual education between Mexican and U.S. religious communities concerned with binational migration issues. It will also be important for representatives and leaders of those communities to forge new mechanisms for bilateral engagement and action among themselves. Meeting participants developed the following ideas for future coordinated action:

- Follow-up meeting in Mexico or the U.S.;
- Revival of North American Church Consultation on Migration;
- Development of a U.S.-Mexico ecumenical working group on migration; and
- Production of a joint analysis of migratory phenomenon between two countries.

At the end of the Saturday morning session, participants were joined by Samuel Ruiz, the former bishop of the diocese of San Cristobal de las Casas in Chiapas. Throughout his four decades as Bishop in Chiapas, Ruiz became well known for his efforts on behalf of the rights of indigenous people of that state. Bishop Ruiz spoke eloquently of the spiritual roots of his human rights work, and led all participants in a moving prayer to close the delegation.

