

Guest Columns

Leaders should address root causes of caravans

By The Rev. Roger Scott Powers / St. Andrew Presbyterian Church Pastor

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Why are so many Central Americans fleeing their countries? Why are they leaving everything behind and traveling over 2,000 miles to seek asylum in the United States?

I went to Honduras from March 18 to 25 seeking answers to those questions. I was part of a delegation of 72 faith leaders and immigrant justice advocates who met with grassroots and religious partners to better understand the root causes of migration that have led thousands to flee Honduras. The interfaith delegation was co-sponsored by the Interfaith Movement for Human Integrity, SHARE El Salvador, Sisters of Mercy and the Leadership Conference of Women Religious.

We found that a war on the poor is being waged in Honduras. The refugees from that war are fleeing for their lives, ending up on our southern border.

Honduras has the highest level of income inequality in Latin America. Wealth and power are concentrated in the hands of a dozen intermarried families known as the “oligarchs,” who control most of the economy, while 68 percent of Hondurans live in poverty. Job opportunities are scarce, and among Hondurans who do find work, most don’t make enough to support their families. Of all wage earners in Honduras, 75% receive less than subsistence wages.

One woman told us she works from 6 a.m. to 1 p.m. every day collecting and recycling plastic. She makes 20 to 30 lempira – about \$1 – a day, enough to buy a pound each of rice and beans and some corn flour to make tortillas to feed her family of five. In her small neighborhood of 20 families, six people have left with the caravans in the hope of making it to the U.S.

If extreme poverty wasn’t enough, Honduran communities are also under siege by gangs engaged in extortion. If you don’t pay what a gang demands, you are risking your life. If a gang wants to recruit your son or daughter, refusing puts your whole family at risk. Leaving the country is often the only option if you want your family to live.

Honduras has one of the highest murder rates in the world. The rule of law has almost completely broken down, allowing gangs, drug cartels and corrupt security forces to operate with near impunity.

Some Hondurans migrate because they have been forcibly displaced from their homes by corporations with an insatiable appetite for land, and they feel they have nowhere else to go. We met with several communities fighting displacement by mining companies, hydroelectric projects, agribusiness and real estate developers. When community leaders struggle to defend their communities, their land and water, through legal, nonviolent means, they are treated like criminals and suffer repression at the hands of the Honduran military and police, which receive arms and training from the United States.

Asked what message the Hondurans wanted us to bring back to the U.S., the answer was always the same: stop sending U.S. military and police aid to the Honduran government. “U.S. weapons are killing our women and children,” one Honduran said. “We don’t need more guns!”

To that end, the Berta Cáceres Human Rights in Honduras Act – H.R. 1945 – would suspend U.S. military and

security aid to Honduras until human rights abuses committed by Honduran security forces cease and their perpetrators are brought to justice. Berta Cáceres was the Honduran environmental activist and indigenous leader who received the Goldman Environmental Prize in 2015 and was assassinated in her home on March 2, 2016. Of the eight people arrested in her case, two received training at Fort Benning, Georgia, the former School of the Americas, now called (the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation), whose graduates have been connected to thousands of murders and human rights violations in Latin America. I am grateful that Rep. Deb Haaland, D-N.M., has co-sponsored this bill, and I hope fellow Democratic Reps. Ben Ray Luján and Xochitl Torres Small will do so as well.

Addressing the root causes of migration – poverty, violence, forced displacement and government-sponsored repression – is a much-needed, long-term strategy. In the short term, volunteers and contributions will continue to be needed to help welcome and provide hospitality to asylum-seekers traveling through our state.

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