Wall to Wall, Part 2
THE U.S.-MEXICO BORDER WALL

Residents and pundits tout the U.S.-Mexico border wall as a national security tool, designed to thwart drug smugglers and terrorists. In reality, like many separation barriers around the world, our wall was also built to keep out the poor and hungry searching for a better life.

In our society, rejection of the immigrant—the other—still runs deep, whether due to fear, ignorance, racism or selfishness. All of these reasons are likely behind the recent decision to put women and young children fleeing violence in Central America behind another kind of wall—the walls of detention centers.

Jesus’ words in Matthew 25 were quite clear: “for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me.” The dusty handprints in the photo to the left show that not even walls can stop those struggling to meet these most basic of needs.

Jesus urged his followers to tear down the barriers that separate us from one another and to risk everything to reach out in love to the other. What will you risk? How will you reach out to those desperate enough—and brave enough—to climb over walls?

Dusty handprints left by those who climbed over a segment of the border fence near Naco, Arizona.
North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which encouraged the free flow of goods but not the free flow of persons. Small-scale farmers in Mexico could no longer compete with crops imported from the U.S., but migrating to the U.S. in search of jobs became increasingly difficult.

Seasonal laborers used to return to their home countries in the off-season, but, as it became more dangerous and expensive to cross the border, many remained in the U.S.—and brought their families with them. As a result, the stepped-up border militarization actually led to an increase in the undocumented population in the U.S.

By building border walls, U.S. policy focused on the symptoms rather than the causes of the problem. As long as poverty, lack of opportunity and violent conflict push people to come to the U.S.—and, as long as opportunities, safety and family members pull people here—there will be migration. When the legal routes are either not available or severely restricted, as they are in the U.S., people will come whatever way they can.

And no wall will stop them.

On my last visit to the border I saw a couple of young men climb over a section of the border wall into Mexico. It took them less than ten seconds. Later, on the Mexico side of the border, I spoke with a father recently deported after more than 30 years in the U.S. It was easy to see that no wall would keep him from trying to reunite with his family.

In addition to walls on the border, the U.S. has built dozens of detention centers to deter would-be migrants. Hundreds of thousands of immigrants are held behind these walls each year, some for months or even years, awaiting deportation. The private prison companies running most of these facilities have profited nicely from tougher immigration enforcement laws.

Behind these walls are immigrants such as Mennonite pastor Max Villatoro, who was held in detention

Just a few years after President Ronald Reagan stood in West Berlin and proclaimed “tear down this wall,” the United States began building its own separation walls on the U.S.-Mexico border. Then, in the heightened security environment after September 11, 2001, Congress passed laws mandating the construction of hundreds more miles of walls and fencing along our southern boundary. In order to speed construction, they waived dozens of environmental, health and safety, and cultural preservation laws.

This heightened militarization of the border came in the wake of the

A paper airplane

“I missed my dad so much, I made a paper airplane to take me to him, but the guards took it away. They said I couldn’t have it.”

—Six year old released after being held by the U.S. government while requesting asylum

On May 2, along with hundreds of other persons, including other persons from San Antonio Mennonite Church, I marched to one of several detention centers in South Texas which detain women and children asking for asylum, and asked that those women be released and the centers be closed.

The women come with horrendous stories of fear and abuse but are held as criminals in detention camps, although in fact they are refugees.

As I walked, I fell in step with a young mother of three; one of her children was recruited by a drug cartel, and so she fled to save her life and that of her children.

I commented that my wife, Ruth, weekly visits the place she was detained. She asked who my wife is.

And then we both wept as she told her story of despair and ongoing detention with her children. She told me how Ruth came to visit her earlier in the week and brought her words of encouragement and hope and somehow, against all odds, she was released. The odds of the two of us meeting in a crowd of hundreds aren’t good enough for lottery betting, but they are marvelous for seeing God’s love and care.

Together we marched to challenge the incarceration of innocent women and children who have committed no crime.

Since January 2015, San Antonio Mennonite Church (SAMC) has contributed to hosting over 800 Central American refugees released from family detention centers in South Texas. In conjunction with the Interfaith Welcome Coalition and the Refugee and Immigrant Center for Education and Legal Services, families who are released from detention centers are transported to SAMC properties and offered food, clothing, medicine, phone access, legal services, and a place to stay the night before they depart to their destination city.

—Excerpted from “#WeAreMenno: A paper airplane” by Jonathan Beachy of San Antonio, Texas, published by Mennonite Church USA. Reprinted with permission.
before being deported to Honduras in March. Pastor Max had been in the U.S. for 20 years and has a wife and four children in Iowa City. He was targeted for deportation due to documented fraud and drunk-driving convictions from the 1990s. His case is not an exception. While the Obama administration claims to be deporting “felons, not families,” they are in fact picking up primarily nonviolent offenders with old convictions.

Behind the newest detention center walls you can hear the cries of babies and small children. In 2014, three new “family detention centers” were opened to hold thousands of mothers and young children fleeing violence and poverty in Central America. These immigrants did not climb over a wall but crossed the Rio Grande in Texas and turned themselves over to authorities—the beginning of an internationally-recognized process for claiming asylum in another country.

Most have credible asylum cases and could be released to extended family in the U.S. while awaiting their court dates, saving taxpayer money and saving the families additional trauma. In August, a federal judge ruled that such detention is not suitable for children. The children—hopefully, with their mothers—could be released later this fall, unless the case is held up in an appeals process.

Policy solutions

The only immigration bills currently being debated in the U.S. Congress, though not likely to pass, focus on harsh enforcement measures, more deportations and more walls. It could be several years before we see a serious immigration reform bill. (Some experts estimate this will not happen until 2022, which would be the first Congress after the redrawing of congressional districts following the 2020 census.) Any comprehensive immigration reform bill should address the root causes of migration to the U.S. and provide compassionate solutions both for immigrants currently here and those wanting to migrate (see insert).

What can I do?

Anabaptists all over the country today are reaching out to migrants in amazing ways. In Georgia and Colorado, groups host families who have loved ones in detention centers. In Arizona and Texas, they help refugee families arriving from Central America (see “A paper airplane” box). In Iowa, the Friends of Pastor Max group continues to advocate for Pastor Max and others like him. These are just a few examples of folks walking in the footsteps of Christ, risking, reaching out and being filled. ✪
Gathering and praising

STS 53  Here to the house of God we come
STS 52  Whatsoever you do
HWB 176 Comfort, comfort O my people

Scripture readings

Luke 10:25–37, Psalm 31

Sermon ideas

The origins of the “Hebrew” people were not primarily racial or ethnic. Biblical scholars believe the biblical term “Hebrew” was a designation for outsiders—vagrants and vagabonds—people who were an inconvenience and, occasionally, an overt threat to ruling authorities. Thus, the Hebrew is one who crosses borders, who has no social power and no legal claim on resources or status, whose desperate efforts of sheer survival push them to ignore the boundaries of assigned bounty.

In 2007, Manuel Jesus Cordova had snuck across the border from Mexico, and came upon a 9-year-old boy alone and injured in the desert. The boy and his mother had been in a single-car accident on a remote road and his mother had been killed. Cordova gave the boy his sweater and some chocolate and built a fire, which drew the attention of the border patrol. Cordova was initially honored for the rescue but later arrested and deported back to Mexico.

This story is not meant to romanticize those who enter the U.S. without documentation. No doubt that within the ranks of immigrants—documented or undocumented—there are the same proportion of saints and scoundrels as are already here. But his story serves as a reminder that each immigrant has a name and a history. They are not simply statistics.

—Excerpted from “Out of the House of Slavery” Bible study by Ken Sehested at Prayer & Politiks, prayerandpolitiks.org

Responding

STJ 69  Cuando el pobre
STS 115 Beauty for brokenness

Praying

Jesus, you also were a migrant walking from town to town speaking of and making manifest the kingdom of God. Forgive us for the moments when we have not offered proper hospitality, like Joseph offered you, to the migrants in our local and global communities. Forgive us for the moments we have pushed their presence to a tomb of despair. May we become awakened to the depths of the human experience, family loyalty, and courage of the migrant’s journey embracing their hopes and gifts and the joy of your resurrection together! Amen.

—“The Migrant’s Way of the Cross” by Father Simon C. Kim

Sending

HWB 419 Lead on, O cloud of Presence
Facts about U.S. border and detention walls...

653 MILES
of border fences, walls and other barriers on the U.S.-Mexico border

37 LAWS WAIVED
to speed construction of walls—including the Endangered Species Act, the Safe Drinking Water Act and the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act

$18 billion
Cost of immigration enforcement per year (more than all other federal law enforcement agencies combined)

85,000
Number of immigrants held in detention in 1995

440,000
Number of immigrants held in detention in 2013

$158
Cost of detaining one person per day (FY 2013)

4,000
Number of Border Patrol agents in 1993

21,000
Number of Border Patrol agents in 2013

Sources: Congressional Research Service, Sierra Club, U.S. Customs and Border Protection, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops/Center for Migration Studies
## POLICY PRINCIPLES

**U.S. border and immigration policies should...**

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1</strong></td>
<td>Choose smart and humane border security strategies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2</strong></td>
<td>Address the root causes of migration.</td>
</tr>
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<td><strong>3</strong></td>
<td>End indiscriminate raids and detention.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>4</strong></td>
<td>Maintain family-based immigration.</td>
</tr>
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<td><strong>5</strong></td>
<td>Ensure a pathway to citizenship.</td>
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<td><strong>6</strong></td>
<td>Create fair guest worker programs.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>7</strong></td>
<td>Ensure access to basic benefits.</td>
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**Current U.S. immigration policies have increased fear in immigrant communities and contributed to the rise in deaths of migrants crossing the border.**

**Border security strategies should protect community rights, human dignity and the natural environment.**

**Individuals are willing to risk their lives crossing the desert because the alternative—facing abject poverty or persecution in their home country—is so bleak. Ultimately, the United States must seek foreign policy solutions and trade agreements that promote economic opportunity and stability in migrants’ home countries.**

**Workplace raids and mass detentions create a culture of fear and harm entire communities. Indiscriminate raids and detention should be halted for non-dangerous immigrants, while targeting enforcement efforts on drug, weapon and people smugglers.**

**Long wait lists keep families separated for years and encourage efforts to circumvent the system. The current family-based immigration system should be maintained and there should be an increase in the number of available family visas, so that families can reunite and immigrate together in a legal and timely way.**

**Many of the estimated 11 million undocumented immigrants in the U.S. are long-time members of their communities and have established families, jobs, businesses, and churches. Some were brought to the country as children and know no other home. Any immigration reform bill should contain a legal pathway to citizenship for immigrants currently living in the United States, without requiring unworkable fines or “touchback” provisions.**

**Lax oversight of guest worker programs leaves a system ripe for exploitation and worker abuse. Guest worker programs should contain appropriate oversight mechanisms to protect labor rights such as fair wages, employer choice and due process protections. Immigrant workers should have the opportunity to apply for permanent status and, eventually, citizenship.**

**Many current immigration policies seek to deter access to public health and safety services and lead to a culture of fear and isolation in immigrant communities. Lawfully present immigrants should have access to basic public benefits and services. No one should be discouraged from seeking necessary health care or reporting a crime.**

### Resources for learning more

- **MCC U.S. Washington Office**
  - [washingtonmemo.org/immigration](http://washingtonmemo.org/immigration)
- **Interfaith Immigration Coalition**
  - [interfaithimmigration.org](http://interfaithimmigration.org)
- **Migration Policy Institute**
  - [migrationpolicy.org](http://migrationpolicy.org)
- **American Immigration Lawyers Association**
  - [aila.org](http://aila.org)