

**Scott:** There is a biblical case to be made that we're all temporary residents.

Since the flight from Eden in Genesis to an exiled John in Revelation, the Bible is steeped in language of displacement and migration.

The Old Testament is marked by a wandering people searching for home.

The Israelites were continuously exiled through different kingdoms and lands.

This transient status continues in the New Testament where Paul explains in Ephesians that our chief citizenship is with God's kingdom.

We are all sojourners on this earth.

I'm Scott Campbell and you're listening to "Relief, development and podcast," a production of Mennonite Central Committee.

### *MUSIC FADES UP AND THEN DOWN*

Today on the show, we're talking about migration. What causes people to leave their home? Why can some people move freely across borders, while other people are criminalized for it? We want to think more critically and find a deeper understanding of the human experience of migration.

**Scott:** Our guest today is Saulo Padilla. He was born in Guatemala and when he was 10, his father sought asylum as a political refugee and was separated from Saulo and the rest of his family. They didn't reunite until six years later in Calgary, Alberta. Today, he works for MCC and has served as an Immigration Education coordinator for 15 years.

Saulo coordinates immigration law trainings for non-profits offering immigration legal services and leads learning tours to the U.S./Mexico borderlands and the Guatemala/Mexico border. He joins us via Zoom today from his home in Goshen, Indiana. Welcome, Saulo. Thank you for speaking with me today!

**Saulo:** Yeah, thank you so much for this opportunity.

**Scott:** Can you tell us a bit about your own experience migrating?

**Saulo:** Yeah. I was born in Guatemala, I should start there. The first time I crossed a border was in August of 1980. I was 10 years old and my mother and us five children, we were crossing the border into Mexico. My father had left Guatemala three months before that, as a political refugee. My father was an activist and organizer in Guatemala. He was a student at a university that was very outspoken about social justice. And in October of 1978, he was kidnapped and tortured. And then he was released. But after that, he continued to receive death threats.

So by 1980, he had to leave the country, because he was threatened that he was going to be killed if he didn't leave the country. So he left in May of 1980. And then a few months later, my mom was able to get our passports ready, and then we were able to cross into Mexico, to look for my dad. And then we lived in Mexico for a few months as political refugees. And then during that time, my father he applied

for refugee status in Canada through the time that we were there. And for some reason, that is a bit of a mystery, and a mix of controversial stories in our family, then my mother and as five children were returned to Guatemala, but my father was accepted as a political refugee to Canada. And then he went to Canada in January of 1981. But about a month before that, then the rest of the family was returned to Guatemala. And I did not get to see my father until February 1986, when we immigrated to Canada.

So that's the second migration experience. And yeah, that's, that's our, kind of my main migration experiences as a young person. In 2001, I immigrated to the United States, to be, to study at Goshen College. And so, I moved from Canada as a, I'm a Guatemalan citizen, I'm a Canadian citizen by that time. And then I am immigrating to the United States to study here in Goshen, Indiana. This time with my wife and three daughters, and we moved to Goshen. And so Goshen, Indiana has been home for the last 20 years. So that's kind of my experience migrating some point as the son of a refugee, as an immigrant and then, in the last 20 years living in United States. First as a student, then as a religious worker, and now working for MCC in, here in the United States as an immigration education coordinator.

**Scott:** What was it like being separated from your father and then seeing him again, after all those years?

**Saulo:** Yeah, you know, when I, when I think about the time that we were separated, it was about six years. And also, that was between the ages, I was 10 years old when we went to Mexico, and when I last saw my dad at that point, and then we reunited in Calgary, when I was turning 16. And those were my teenage years and also very important years in my life. He was, well one, it was very hard at that point to stay in touch with dad. I remember calls, phone calls, at that point, were about \$7 per minute, right? We didn't have WhatsApp, Facebook, none of these things were available. It was all by call. And we didn't have a phone in our house. So, we have to use a neighbor's phone, or go to phone company to line up in a booth to be able to call my dad.

So, it was, it was hard to keep the relationship that way. And so, spending life far away from dad, it was hard in that way, also, that my mother had to work long hours during the day and for the whole week sometimes to support the family. My dad would send money once in a while when he could. But then my mum had to work really, really hard and long hours. So then it was hard, because of the relationship with my father, being away from him. But also, I was not doing very well in school, I didn't have a lot of support during that time in my teenage years.

One of the things that I also think about when I think about that time is how I used to daydream all the time, about the day when we will reunite with dad and bring the family back together. When the time actually came where we reunited, the reality was different. We arrived in Canada, we faced many challenges, new culture, new environment, the cold winter, language. But the greatest challenge was how to become a family again. We were strangers to dad and he was stranger to us. We'd not have the support to walk through the process of becoming a family again. So, my mother fell into a deep depression. Her and my father has started to have problems. So, we, the children started to have problems and felt the stress in the relationship.

They ended up separating, and my mother went back to Guatemala with my sister. And my brothers and I stayed with dad. So, at this point, when I think about that time, being separated from dad and then reuniting. I think, you know, we were separated, it was hard to be far away, but then when we were in proximity to each other, and we came together, it was hard to be family again. And then at that point is

probably when our family was more broken than any other time. Because we were close to each other but very broken because of the pain of reuniting.

**Scott:** It sounds like that would have been so painful and confusing. I imagine your own experience would in many ways, impact the work you do today. How do you think your personal story informs your work at MCC?

**Saulo:** In many different ways, my personal experience informs my work. One is because I have experienced family separation, which is a situation that many families continue to have to experience today. And families that we work with here in the United States and facing migration everywhere in the world. So, I do understand that in that being part of my personal experience, and I'm able to talk about it when I'm speaking in churches and in groups as well, from a personal perspective.

The other part that I can speak about, when I talk in churches about this, is that I am not speaking from stories that I have heard somewhere else from migrants. I'm speaking about The Church welcoming strangers from a personal perspective, around the time when all this happened in Canada and our family was breaking up, it was at that time when we started looking for an Evangelical Church in, in Calgary. And then that's where we bumped into the first Hispanic Mennonite church in Calgary. And that church was a mix of asylum seekers, refugees and immigrants who had come from all over Latin America. The only two things that we had in common were Spanish in some of the songs that we worship with and our experience as immigrants and refugees and asylum seekers. But also, this church became our network and our family. And when our family broke up, they were the church that became this network of connections and support and they used to cry with us. And also, they knew what it was to be a stranger. So, they embraced us and hugged us and they helped us go through all that.

So that experience informs my work constantly. And I am able to invite churches, then from a personal experience I know, I know, the church can do this. And I'm not saying that just because I read it somewhere, but because I have experienced that welcome embrace from the church.

**Scott:** It sounds like that personal connection has really helped you do your job well. Can you describe what you do in a typical day?

**Saulo:** Oh, wow, I don't know there's a typical day in my work. It, it varies so much, from day to day, there are days when a lot of stuff is administrative pieces of my work. But then there are days, let's say yesterday, when I walk into the office in the morning and receive an email from a pastor, who is dealing with a Salvadoran family who had applied for asylum and the church has been working with them for a few years now. But then their asylum case was denied. So now the church is trying to figure out how to support them as they're being, probably been deported, or are planning to stay in the United States after receiving a deportation order.

So that is, so part of my work is then how to provide information to these churches and how to walk with strangers and walk with immigrants, asylum seekers and refugees. That's one, the other one is trying to figure out then how do we provide learning opportunities to our constituents in the United States, to MCC constituency in the United States, to welcome, to advocate for immigrants, and also then to see how we can provide hospitality in our communities as well. So then, that is also part of my work is walking with churches in that. There are other days when a typical day is actually leading a learning tour to the border and taking a group to the border for a week. And then walking along communities, both sides of the border understanding migration issues on both sides, and how do we talk about migration in

what we hear from stories at the border. So that's the other part of my work. So typical days, I don't know if there's something typical about any day that I work, which I love. I think this is work that I love to do, and it keeps it exciting every day.

**Scott:** And what do you find most challenging about the work?

**Saulo:** I often think about the challenges that that come my way. Probably the biggest challenge is when we have a group of people in the United States or people in in the United States who there are no benefits for them. Continuously, they're vulnerable here in the United States. A lot of people who are undocumented, or people who are seeking asylum, but we know there's no pathway for them to find refuge here. And a lot of it is political, and so then how do we address that? And how do we move our, our communities our Mennonite Anabaptist communities in the United States, to be educated, to be supportive of change and a lot of it then is through education, and then through political also political arena, to work in that.

But at this point in the United States, then in the last years has been challenging because the country is very polarized and divided. So then how do we build that bridges between our constituents and our brothers and sisters in our churches? You know, we have the polarization, Mennonites, very liberal and progressive to very conservative as well. So then, in both in theological and also in political ways. So how do we build those bridges? So, my challenge sometimes is the biggest challenge probably is, how do we do that? How do we build bridges in between these groups, and how to bring them together so that we can cause change?

**Scott:** In many ways, I get a really clear sense of what you do. And then in other ways, it just feels like it's such a large task that you have been given responsibility for. Is there a story that comes to mind that illustrates for us like, what it is that you're engaged with the work that you're doing?

**Saulo:** Probably one of the most exciting stories that I can think about in the last few years, is a few years ago, I received an email from a brother from Ohio, a Mennonite brother from Ohio. In his email, he said, he actually asked questions about what MCC was doing about illegal immigration. And he said, you know, there are thousands, I think he said there are 20,000 people went across the border here illegally. And they're trying to come in here and take advantage of resources. What is MCC doing? Are you supporting illegal immigration? So my response to the email, then I responded by saying, well, you know, MCC is working in 50 countries at that time, supporting relief, development and peace work and helping communities to stay together and people stay in their communities. And also helping people migrate as they have to. That's the biggest work that we're doing at this point. But then also, I invited him to come on a learning tour that I was leading about a month later.

And I said, would you come on a boarder learning tour with me so you can hear from committees at the border, what is happening? He replied by saying, well, I will think about that and I will let you know, I'll pray about it. So then about three days later, he responded, he said yes. He came to this border learning tour, and in that learning tour, he was able to go and we prayed on the border wall. And then we talked to border patrol officers on the side and the border patrol officer we heard from, he was a Baptist. And he talked about how his faith informed his work and how sometimes he found migrants in the desert who had not eaten for a couple of days. So he, sometimes, he'd pull out his lunch out of the truck, and then he'd give them his food and and also water and took care of them. But also he had to deport them at some point, you know, he had to process that and deport them.

And then we crossed the border on the other side, and we heard from a migrant's shelter, and then we went to eat at a place, a home from a family in Mexico, from a Presbyterian Church. And the person who cooked for us that day was the man of the house. And he tells a story about how at some point he was a smuggler, he was crossing people, he have been detained in a detention centre in the United States. He crossed illegally at some point, but then he was deported. And then he became a smuggler. And then he became a Presbyterian. At some point, he actually crossed the border with a Bible in his backpack and crossing people how he used to pray for people before crossing the border with them, praying that God will protect them as they arrive to their homes here in the United States and with family, reunite the families. So he saw his job sometimes to reunite families.

Anyhow, by the end of that time, in that night, our brother from Ohio was absolutely confused about this whole thing, but also at least the single story and the narrative that he had about the border had changed tremendously by all these encounters with people at the border. And then by the end of the night, he actually approached that man in Mexico, who had told us his story. And he said to him, if you ever cross the border into the United States again, and you find yourself in Ohio, he said, I have a business over there and you can come and work for me.

That change is what I love about my work. When I'm able to provide opportunities for change and for narratives to be expanded and for people to be confused in that way. That is probably one of the biggest joys of my work. And when I feel that God is present in storytelling, in narratives, and we provide those connections through our work at MCC, that is what, that's what I do. That's what I love about my work and yeah, and that's what happens in my in my work at all times, and that's what I'm looking for, to provide those moments of change and storytelling.

**Scott:** Wow, it sounds like you've really seen the impacts firsthand of how powerful stories can be. Before COVID, many of us in Canada in the United States didn't give border crossings a second thought many of us travelled freely for work and vacations. But many others seeking refuge and asylum are criminalized for crossing borders. Can you explain how migration is a challenge for some why some people can cross the border with ease while others cannot?

**Saulo:** I think that at the most fundamental level that question or my response for that is that, the fact that migration today is tied to a value that we place on or the newcomer on the person who is migrating or who is coming. The focus is on what migrants can provide to a receiving community. Even if we pay attention to the messages and narratives that even sometimes we use, pro-immigrant groups and individuals use in North America. Most of the time, there is an economic value attached the reason why people need or should be welcomed. Messages such as, well immigrants pay taxes, or they're hard working, or immigrants start businesses faster than locals. Or things like, migrants are to be welcomed only if they can produce so they have value for our economy. So, so a lot of it is economic. And the foundation, why we welcome people is what they can provide for us.

And when we talk about dual migration, then we look at the countries that can provide us with the best immigrants, in some ways, or source countries that can provide us the best refugees or people who can, you know, make us feel safe about their move. So, then we close doors. When we open doors for countries that we have an economic alliance with or can provide us with the "good immigrants" or "good migrants," and we close the door to those who have literally nothing to offer to us at this point. So that's I think one of the fundamental things about migration today that is clearly tied to economic value of, that we have placed on people migrating.

I think that also depends on politicians and politics a lot. Those in power, decide who is welcome. For example, a few years ago, if a Cuban was to touch the U.S., the land in the U.S., they automatically receive protection. But in the last two years, I have found many Cubans waiting for months along the U.S./Mexico border to cross and start their asylum cases. What has changed is politics. Politicians have changed and some of the politics have changed also with Cuba. So then, what was very easy for Cubans to do before, just by touching land, and now we are pushing them away a little bit and making wait for that. What has changed is not the people, what has changed is the politics that we placed on them. So then that's it.

We also treat countries and people in those countries differently based on our trade agreements. And, for example, we are helping build border security between Haiti and Dominican Republic. The U.S. Border Patrol has been involved in training Dominican border security. The reason is that we have a trade agreement with Dominican Republic, they're part of the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA). So as a partner, we are protecting them. Meanwhile, we are exacerbating the situation in Haiti that is already in terrible situations, economically and politically. But for the longest time, migration has served as a relief valve in some ways for Haiti, for people coming to Dominican Republic and going back to Haiti migrating to, you know, for economic resources to work, but now we're closing that relief valve, so then we are making it worse for Haiti at this point. And, so then those are some of the reasons I think why, at this point, and most of them are economic, that we're making it hard for some people to migrate and pushing them away. We have these narratives of the "good" immigrant and the "bad" immigrants. That are at play at this point.

**Scott:** At MCC, we often say we support people's rights to stay and people's rights to leave. Would you explain what that means and why that's important?

**Saulo:** Yeah, I think, you know, we have been working on this, and I think the foundation on that is also biblical. It's this peaceable kingdom idea, the kingdom of God, where people are able to sit under their own vine and fig tree. Micah 4:4 actually talks about this. When people can stay in their communities and flourish in their land, in their territory, then we should support that.

So when we talk about MCC working in development, and relief, development and peace, in helping people in their communities is this idea of people flourishing in their land, their territory. But for people to have the freedom of choice, that to seek for opportunities, and this is biblical as well in the way that we have seen people and we read about people in the Bible, that want to stay in their communities. And land has value in so many different ways, right? But there are other people who want to migrate and move. So that's, that's, I think, so those two principles of people, having right to stay in flourish in their own land, but also we recognize people who are facing pushes and pulls of migration. And then we also then people having the right to, to migrate and to seek a better future and job opportunities in our communities as well. So having that that right also to seek that and that also is based on biblical foundations.

**Scott:** So, what does that support for people in whatever choice they make look like? Like, how is MCC supporting these people?

**Saulo:** Yeah, well, I think the work of relief, development and peace that we do in, in communities around the world, countries around the world at this point, it translates into working with people who are their communities and helping them with issues of education and hygiene and in the work that we do, working in areas of conflict with peacebuilding, in. So those projects that we work in, in some ways,

is helping people stay, in making those choices of staying and flourishing in those areas. Then, we also through work that we're doing MCC at this point, we are supporting people who are in transition and moving from one place to another and people who are looking for that better future somewhere else because it's either, they're facing danger. Right now, people are facing a lot of climate change issues as well. So then that is another area where we're supporting people who are in that migration process.

And then people who are arriving and who are coming, and then preparing the communities that are receiving them in a way that we're doing here in the United States and Canada, other places too. How do we offer hospitality from a biblical perspective, but how that also is possible in our communities, and prepare the receiving community so that people can feel welcome? Newcomers can feel welcome here as well. So I think that's how the work of MCC of relief development and peace translates internationally but also here in North America.

**Scott:** I've heard you say a couple of times now that your approach to this work is informed by a biblical call to welcome the stranger. Can you talk a little bit about what your understanding of this call is and what you use as a definition of hospitality?

**Saulo:** Yeah, well, when I read the Bible and biblical narratives, I find a God who is a God of hospitality. In the Scriptures from the beginning to the end, we find that God comes to us as a stranger. In Genesis, God shows up at Abraham's tent as three strangers and Abraham offers hospitality in antiquity, the God would come and walk among us, mortals and humans. And humans will be tested in some ways. And so that was a vision also in antiquity of offering hospitality to strangers. It wasn't based on the value that they can provide, actually, some people would be invited to offer hospitality to the poor or the needy, because God could be there, right?

Which is something that the vision of hospitality, I am often surprised that we have all these doctrines and dogmas of the church and teachings of the Church, but we have not been able to continue this teaching of hospitality that is very central, and that we find all over the Bible. In the New Testament, we are told that we're taught to entertain strangers, because some have offered hospitality to the divine, to God and to angels, without knowing. So then we can only understand Hebrews, that passage in Hebrews, if we understand that God comes to us sometimes and is among us. And so what would the world look like, if we were able to offer hospitality to each other thinking that, well, anybody could be God. Right, we could be tested.

I think the final piece that I think is important for people to see, and I think is centred in one of the stories that Jesus told, or the example from Jesus...in Matthew, there is a final judgement that Jesus is talking about. The goats are separated from the sheep. And they are judged for, but they're not judged on what they believe, or their politics or anything else. What actually are the rules for the judgement and, and they're being judged on and what Jesus says the final judgement will be based on is actually hospitality. Who was able to visit those were in jail, who clothed the naked, and then who welcomes strangers, and we who offered food and water? So, then, I think it hospitality is central to our, to our Christian beliefs. And God is a God of hospitality. So we should, if we are to be following God's commandment of welcoming strangers, then we should respond by welcoming each other, and welcome those who especially who are in need in our communities.

**Scott:** There are a lot of misconceptions out there. What do you wish people understood about migration and asylum seekers?

**Saulo:** Um, in my work, I have found that many people, especially here in North America, we kind of live in a bubble of what is happening in the world. And that people are not aware of why people migrate. And that's become a very fundamental part of my work. A very important part of my work of speaking about the root causes of migration, why people migrate, why they're coming. And sometimes we have to be very honest and sincere about it and say that sometimes it's caused by our practices here in North America and also our politics and our foreign policies in other countries around the world.

I often, when I tell my own personal story about my father being a political refugee, well, that takes me back to the 1950s in Guatemala, where the United States was involved in turning Guatemala into a Banana Republic. The CIA bombarded Guatemala City, they took over, they placed dictators for many years and that started a war of 36 years in Guatemala, where 200,000 people died. And I find a lot of people don't know that. So, the root causes of my own personal migration and my family are related to that as well.

And so I, I do think that people need to understand the push-and-pull factors of migration and the root cause of people's migration today, and how we can also help prevent people from migrating when we can get involved in that and support that there's development and relief and peace in other countries so that we can also help people stay in their communities. Have this biblical vision of people sitting under their vines and their fig trees and stay in their homes when they want to.

**Scott:** Saulo, it's been such a pleasure speaking with you today the passion you have for the work, the dedication you have to people who many times don't have people, you're their people. Thanks so much for sharing your stories.

**Saulo:** Thank you so very much for this opportunity. I really enjoyed doing this with you.

**Scott:** That was Saulo Padilla, MCC's Immigration Education coordinator in the United States. There are so many different reasons people choose to leave home. The stories you heard today are just a small sampling. If you'd like to learn more, we'll point you towards some resources in the show notes:

<https://ohiomennoniteconference.org/2022/01/borderlands-learning-tour-no-easy-answers/>

<https://mcc.org/asylum-storymap>

<https://mcc.org/centennial/100-stories/open-your-arms-invitation>

<https://mcc.org/stories/come-along-virtual-tour-us-mexico-border>

[https://mcccanada.ca/sites/mcccanada.ca/files/media/common/documents/whydopeopleleavehome-understandingtherootcausesofdisplacementandmigrationupdated92920\\_0.pdf](https://mcccanada.ca/sites/mcccanada.ca/files/media/common/documents/whydopeopleleavehome-understandingtherootcausesofdisplacementandmigrationupdated92920_0.pdf)

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ky3NSEo6ZUg&ab\\_channel=MennoniteCentralCommittee](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ky3NSEo6ZUg&ab_channel=MennoniteCentralCommittee)

That's it for this episode. Next month, we'll hear more stories of migration. This time from two women who came to Canada from Afghanistan. Stay tuned.

If you like this podcast, it would be great if you could subscribe and rate it and tell your friends to give us a listen.

This episode of Relief, Development and Podcast was recorded on the unceded territory of the Kwantlen, Katzie, Matsqui and Semihamoo First Nations.

And produced on Treaty 1 territory, the original land of the Anishinaabeg, Cree and Dakota peoples, and the homeland of the Métis Nation.

This episode was produced by Meghan Mast. The head producer is Emily Loewen.

A lot is happening in the world right now. This is a difficult time for many. May you experience God's provision and protection as we work together to share God's love and compassion for all in the name of Christ.

Thanks, take good care.

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