



# AMMPARO

Accompanying Migrant Minors with Protection, Advocacy, Representation and Opportunities

## *Executive Summary*

### INTRODUCTION

In 2014, media put a spotlight on the humanitarian crisis in Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala that led almost 70,000 unaccompanied children and another 70,000 individuals in family units to flee to the United States.<sup>1</sup> In fiscal year (FY) 2015, after varied government responses, the number of children arriving in the U.S. decreased by approximately 42 percent.<sup>2</sup> However, in the last three months of 2015 arrivals of children and families doubled from the previous year.<sup>3</sup> The forced displacement of these families and children is witnessed by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) through its historical and personal connections with churches in the region.

Following several visits by ELCA leaders and staff, one to the U.S.-Mexico border area, another to Central America and a third to Mexico, it became clear that vulnerable children and families are leaving their communities and seeking protection in the U.S. due to violence, poverty and lack of opportunities. Lutheran churches in the region have seen this violence worsen and frequently witness their young leaders being forced to flee their communities. Sometimes it results in internal displacement, while other times it results in children crossing borders to find safety.

Angelica's<sup>4</sup> son migrated to the United States unaccompanied a few years ago after gang members wanted to recruit him. He had to stop attending school because he was being followed by gang members. She believes he was targeted because he did not have a criminal record and was young. "He was a child, and here they prefer children because they can do their bidding and they have the possibility of not going to jail," she said. Because of her son's situation, Angelica made the difficult decision to support her child's escape from the country. "I would rather have him in a place where he is going to be safe than to have him here where a criminal would already have killed him."

1 U.S. Customs and Border Protection. CBP Border Security Report, FY 2014. Dec. 19, 2014. [http://www.cbp.gov/sites/default/files/documents/FINAL\\_Draft\\_CBP\\_FY14\\_Report\\_20141218.pdf](http://www.cbp.gov/sites/default/files/documents/FINAL_Draft_CBP_FY14_Report_20141218.pdf)

2 U.S. Customs and Border Protection. Southwest Border Unaccompanied Alien Children Statistics FY 2015. <http://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/southwest-border-unaccompanied-children/fy-2015>

3 Solis, Dianne. "Another migration crisis may be looming," The Dallas Morning News. <http://www.dallasnews.com/news/local-news/20160113-another-migration-crisis-may-be-looming.ece>

4 Name has been changed.

Those fleeing dangerous or desperate situations today face increased border security in Mexico. The Mexican government now deports more than double the number of Central American children than they did in 2013.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, the Georgetown Law Human Rights Institute has confirmed that many children go unscreened for human trafficking or other protections, which leads to children being returned to dangerous situations.<sup>6</sup> If children ask for protection after being apprehended by immigration officials, they will spend months in Mexican detention centers while their case is reviewed.

Ensuring the safety and humane treatment of children and families does not stop at any geographical border. **As brothers and sisters in Christ, the ELCA is called to bear witness to the conditions affecting so many communities and to work to find solutions that will acknowledge the humanity in all of God's children.**

In order to fulfill these commitments, the ELCA will work purposefully with companions and partners, including Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, through strategies for ministry with:

1. those in the countries of origin;
2. those in countries of transit; and
3. those in the U.S., while focusing on three interdependent guiding principles:  
**ACCOMPANIMENT, AWARENESS  
BUILDING AND ADVOCACY.**

In a holistic, whole church response that connects international and U.S. outcomes, the ELCA has developed this strategy based on the following commitments:

- Uphold and guarantee basic human rights and safety of migrant children and their families;
- Address the root causes of migration in countries from Central America's Northern Triangle and Mexico and the treatment of migrants in transit;
- Work toward just and humane policies affecting migrants in and outside the U.S.; and
- Engage as a church body with all of its companions, affiliates and partners to respond to the migration situation and its causes and to advocate for migrant children and their families.

<sup>5</sup> Secretaría de Gobernación (June 2015). Estadísticas sobre Niñez migrante devuelta, 2010 – junio 2015. Centro de Estudios Migratorias de la Unidad de Política Migratoria.

<sup>6</sup> Georgetown Law Human Rights Institute Fact-Finding Project. (April 13, 2015) "The Cost of Stemming the Tide: How Immigration Enforcement Practices in Southern Mexico Limit Migrant Children's Access to International Protection" [http://www.law.georgetown.edu/academics/centers-institutes/human-rights-institute/fact-finding/upload/HRI-Fact-Finding-Report-Stemming-the-Tide-Web-PDF\\_English.pdf](http://www.law.georgetown.edu/academics/centers-institutes/human-rights-institute/fact-finding/upload/HRI-Fact-Finding-Report-Stemming-the-Tide-Web-PDF_English.pdf)

## THE CALL TO THE CHURCH FOR ENGAGEMENT

The ELCA's 1995 social statement, "For Peace in God's World," states:

All humans are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27), made for life in community—with God, with others, and with the rest of creation.

... Faith in the crucified and risen Lord strengthens us to persist even when God seems absent in a violent and unjust world, and when weariness and hopelessness threaten to overwhelm us.

Through the cross of Christ, God calls us to serve the needs of our neighbor, especially of those groups and individuals who suffer and are vulnerable. The cross assures us that even in our vulnerability, suffering, and death, God's power is active through us.

... Care for the Uprooted. Tens of millions are refugees in foreign lands. At least as many are internally displaced. In unprecedented numbers people have had to flee their homes because of persecution or general violence. We support compassionate survival assistance for refugees and vigorous international protection for them. The world community has a responsibility to aid nations that receive refugees and to help change the situations from which they have fled. In our own country, we support a generous policy of welcome for refugees and immigrants. We pledge to continue our church's historic leadership in caring for refugees and immigrants.

Because we understand each person to be made in God's image – without distinction based on race, ethnicity, gender, economic class or country of origin – and have heard God's call to serve the needs of our neighbor wherever she or he may be, we recognize ourselves to be in mission and ministry together for the benefit of all God's people. (See also "Freed in Christ: Race, Ethnicity and Culture," 1993).

It is on this basis and the many previous actions taken by the ELCA that this church now pledges to continue, intensify and sustain its response in relation to the crisis faced by unaccompanied migrant children and families.

## BACKGROUND

After the number of unaccompanied children arriving in the U.S. from Central America garnered large amounts of media and political attention during the summer of 2014, FY 2015 saw a notable decrease (from 68,541 in FY 2014 to 39,970 in FY 2015) of unaccompanied children.<sup>7</sup> Though this change meant less attention to the plight of unaccompanied children, ELCA partners in the region continued to alert this church that conditions driving so many to be forcibly displaced had not changed. During a time of incredible need, it became evident that the ELCA's holistic approach to addressing this displacement – encompassing their treatment in the U.S., in their countries of origin and in-transit – was critical to ensure the safety of children forced to migrate.

In 2015, ELCA staff traveled to the southern border of Mexico where it became evident that the reduction in the number of children seeking safety in the U.S. was largely due to increased border security in Mexico. The Mexican government deported 12,511 Central American children from January to June in 2015, a figure that stands in contrast with the 5,858 deported in 2012.<sup>8</sup> These numbers highlight the importance of viewing migration holistically by signaling that a decrease in arrivals to the U.S. does not equate to a decrease in the number of people fleeing the Northern Triangle.<sup>9</sup>

## STRATEGY

While the ELCA, its synods, its companion churches, its partner agencies and other related groups have been responding to the situation in the countries of origin, in the countries of transit and in the United States, it is now proposed that a churchwide initiative be undertaken that better coordinates and intensifies this work.

Some examples of **ACCOMPANIMENT** activities include:

- accompaniment of companions in Central America and Mexico who have identified the root causes of thousands of children and families fleeing their communities and have developed programs addressing them;
- enhancing the capacity of companions to develop strategic alliances with organizations in the countries of origin and with outside organizations that are working on the issues of migration, detention, deportation, repatriation and reinsertion and to develop plans of action;
- mobilizing and enhancing the participation of the nine synods and constituents in companionship with churches in the Northern Triangle of Central America;

7 U.S. Customs and Border Protection. (2015). Southwest Border Unaccompanied Alien Children Statistics FY 2015 n. <http://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/southwest-border-unaccompanied-children/fy-2015>.

8 Secretaría de Gobernación (June 2015). Estadísticas sobre Niñez migrante devuelta, 2010 – junio 2015. Centro de Estudios Migratorias de la Unidad de Política Migratoria.

9 Isacson, A. (April 10, 2015). "Latest Border Stats Suggest Higher Family, Child Migration in 2015 than Official Projections." [http://www.wola.org/commentary/unaccompanied\\_children\\_at\\_the\\_us\\_mexico\\_border\\_in\\_the\\_first\\_half\\_of\\_2015](http://www.wola.org/commentary/unaccompanied_children_at_the_us_mexico_border_in_the_first_half_of_2015).

- helping to ensure that children and families in the U.S. will have appropriate legal representation;
- assisting children who do not have sponsors;
- encouraging congregations to foster personal relationships between migrants and non-migrants to better understand the multi-faceted challenges faced by migrants;
- urging congregations to become “safe places/gathering places” for migrants and volunteers; and
- encouraging congregations to develop service centers that focus on needed social services, including “wrap-around services” (e.g. education, life skills training, legal assistance, etc.).

Some examples of **AWARENESS-BUILDING ACTIVITIES** include:

- enhancing ELCA members’ awareness of the situation, through new resources (including the creation of a webpage), documents and other materials;
- working with all ministries in the church to raise awareness for implementation of protocols for adequate treatment of children in Mexico, whether accompanied or unaccompanied, using national and international resources like the Inter-American Commission for Human Rights; and
- conducting immersion programs and tours for ELCA members, colleges, universities, seminaries and others in collaboration with companions in Central America and Mexico with a capacity to receive such visits.

Some examples of **ADVOCACY** activities include:

- addressing the root causes of migration, including outlining needed U.S. policy changes;
- bringing together ELCA synods, ethnic-specific ministries, partners, the Immigration Ready Bench, synods on the Mexico border and other communities serving migrants to advocate for fair and compassionate migration policies;
- advocating for laws and policies that protect children and people fleeing persecution and address the situation of migrants in transit;
- encouraging local advocacy by companions as well as solidarity advocacy by international companions (e.g. ELCA) in a coordinated and collaborative way; and
- enhancing advocacy with migrants by collaborating with U.S. partners to advocate for fair and compassionate policies toward vulnerable migrants, children and families.

To these ends, the ELCA will continue to use existing staff and funding but also seek additional resources for new work and some current work that may require a longer-term commitment or adjustments to current staff responsibilities.