

VOICES

Migration, faith and community in the Mesoamerican Mission Network

A new PC(USA) mission network focuses on migrants leaving Central America for the United States. Anton Ahrens writes about the network's launch.

BY **ANTON AHRENS**

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Photo by Barbara Zandoval on Unsplash

What are we to do? Should my children and I stay with our family who loves us and is all we know? Or should we follow my husband North?

These questions summarize, for me, the simplicity and complexity of migration. I heard them in a personal story shared at the Mesoamerican Mission Network conference on migration in March.

The American press frequently reports about the U.S.-Mexico border and the trauma migrants suffer as they journey North. But whose voices are we hearing? Do we ever encounter the people who have taken the dangerous and expensive journey in search of safety and economic opportunity or to be reunited with family?

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Whose voices are we hearing?”

The Mesoamerican Mission Network (La Red de Misión y Migración en Mesoamérica) officially began at a festive launch ceremony on March 20 in San Salvador, El Salvador. The launch celebration included music, dancing and statements from many network partners across Central America, Mexico and the United States.

The PC(USA) is represented in the network by six PC(USA) presbyteries, three congregations and seven ministries, and the Calvinist Reformed Church of El Salvador (IRCES) is the system’s central organizing body. The Mesoamerican Mission Network is a creation born from a [General Assembly resolution](#) proposed by the [Presbytery of the Pacific](#) on behalf of the IRCES, a PC(USA) partner church, and approved by the 223rd General Assembly in 2018. The initiating overture called for “building a mission and migration network to develop different initiatives that promote rootedness of families in their communities of origin and [continuing to advocate] for change in Northern Central America and the United States.”



A memento to remind network participants of the stories, plight and hardships of immigrants. Contributed photo.

In the days following the launch celebration, our group of about 50 people met to learn more about migration, sharing our experiences, knowledge and love for one another as we built community.

Each day was filled with good food and lively conversation. Our devotions centered on migration stories and Indigenous wisdom. We were educated about the plight of migrants and the services that churches and nonprofits across the region are providing. We took “field trips” to villages where IRCES has worked with community leaders to provide economic opportunities (i.e. school improvements, community gardens, flood control) to improve village life and motivate people to stay in their home community, reducing the appeal of migration.

The mission of the Mesoamerican Mission Network is to address the root causes of migration while promoting respect for the rights of migrants in transit, in their destination country and upon return to their native country (if deported).

Speaking about the formation of the network, Calvinist Reformed Church of El Salvador pastor Santiago Flores and PC(USA) mission coworker Joesph Russ write in PMA’s spring 2024 [Mission Crossroads](#) magazine, “Migration issues cannot be resolved if the conditions of violence, exclusion, poverty and discrimination continue hurting families in Central America. The vision of our God’s justice requires social, economic, political and cultural conditions that allow for full participation in society in the countries of origin so that emigration is not an obligation. In both transit and destination countries, we demand tolerance and respect for migrants’ rights so that they do not experience exploitation and violence. God’s command is that we love the stranger ‘as one born among you’ (Leviticus 19:34).”



Mesoamerican Mission Network members pause for a group photo. (Photo by Roy Horan)

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We are all migrants.

One of the biggest takeaways from the conference is that we are all migrants. Maybe our ancestors migrated here for reasons we do not know, or maybe we are recent migrants who deal daily with memories of that journey. We must tell the stories of our migration and listen with “open ears’ to the stories of others. Migration is a fundamental right of all people. Would we, in the United States, accept the government limiting our ability to move to another city, state or country to improve our economic or physical safety? God has blessed the Earth by filling it with people who have hearts for justice that are filled with compassion and active caring for those on the “migration trail.” The conference participants showed me God’s Love. There is no greater gift. As God reminds us in Exodus 23:9, “You shall not oppress a resident alien; you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.”

As I journey on my “migration road,” I pray for God’s guidance and sustaining spirit to descend on all God’s children:

Gracious God, we pray for your suffering, beautiful, resourceful world today, especially for those people who we so often forget.

We lift up:

Prayers for migrants, whose fears and hopes drives them to migrate, with its many risks.

Prayers for leaders of nations to help migrants gain safe passage.

Prayers for the people who guide migrants through strange lands.

Prayers for your Church to act on Christ’s call to “walk with” migrants and work for Justice for all people.



Prayers for ourselves to discern and admit how we benefit from systems that injure and kill our migrant brothers and sisters. May we work for Justice.

Amen.

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**ANTON AHRENS**

A life-long Presbyterian, Anton strives to do justice, loving kindness, and walking with God. He is active in Topeka JUMP justice ministry- 29 faith communities committed to ending gun violence and homelessness and providing more mental health care and affordable housing. He and Susan, both retired educators, are parents to Shane and Anna.