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STORYTELLING ENGAGEMENT

SEPTEMBER 2025 Mission Support Memo

Where Faith Meets Justice: Mary's Path from Accompaniment to Advocacy

By the Rev. Katie Carroll, reprinted from the blog of our Florida-Bahamas Synod

As you read this story, what inspires you?

Mary had set her sights on the Young Adults in Global Mission (YAGM) program since learning about it during her confirmation program. What with studying Spanish during college and having an interest in immigration, she knew she wanted to be in Central or South America. Mary was assigned to Mexico City to serve in the long-term immigration shelter named Tochan — the word for “our house/home” in the Nahuatl language. Orientation and training provided by the ELCA helped to prepare Mary for what lay ahead. Along with logistical preparations, the young adults were immersed in the ELCA’s accompaniment model, which underscores walking alongside our partners rather than entering a space to take over and direct. With the core values of mutuality, inclusivity, vulnerability, empowerment and sustainability, YAGMs explore what it means to join ongoing ministries — to serve, to learn and to share. Mary further described how the accompaniment model heightened her awareness of privilege due to her coming from a dominant country, and the importance of living simply so as to join in solidarity with those who live on the margins.



Mary’s work at the immigration shelter started off with a variety of tasks: office management and administration, security system monitoring, and “therapy chats,” which involved active listening to people’s stories. As the year unfolded, her primary role came to be assisting people submitting a U.S. Customs and Border Patrol application to obtain an interview for approval to enter the U.S. through its southern border. Through her experiences serving at the Tochan shelter, Mary learned firsthand the challenges and formidable obstacles that are part of an immigrant’s experience. The application is challenging to navigate and accessible only via telephone — a device not available to everyone. Further, the selection process for being granted an interview appointment was neither linear nor predictable, leading some people to wait months on end in the shelter. The reasoning behind one person receiving an appointment versus another seemed entirely arbitrary. Indeed, after a long period of waiting, many would simply determine their application had been lost and the best strategy was to start over and reapply. Feelings of disappointment and desperation grew as anxious applicants waited with no end in sight.

Mary heard countless stories of hardship and risk as people shared about their journey to the shelter, fleeing unsafe communities in pursuit of “the American Dream.” Through her listening, she was humbled by the tenacity and courage of immigrants. Mary’s heart and spirit were transformed as she learned what people go

through for the sake of their families. She was further struck by the solidarity people seeking to emigrate displayed toward each other.

When a young, 18-year-old Venezuelan teen, traveling alone, was granted an interview appointment (to great surprise) after only five days in the shelter, everyone celebrated his good fortune, no matter how long they themselves had been waiting. Through her YAGM year, Mary grew in her passion to work for justice and give dignity to all God's children. Along with the complex and often arbitrary experience people received in their pursuit of an immigration interview, she also saw the unjust treatment to shelter residents as they sought work opportunities while they waited. Mary witnessed people being taken advantage of as, out of desperation, they accepted low-paying, sometimes high-risk jobs. At every turn, the immigrant has obstacles to overcome. Mary returned to the U.S. to serve as a recruiter for the YAGM program — an expression of her desire to give back to a program that gave so much to her. She now serves at Shepherd of the Glades [Church] in Naples, [Fla.], and envisions a career that focuses on service and justice. Her journey continues!

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GRATEFUL

We are grateful for everyone who engages with our Mission Support Memo. When you read, share and engage with this memo, you help us to tell the stories of our collective ministry. You also help to make more people aware of the resources we have available and the engagement opportunities we offer. Many of our newly elected bishops and other synod officers will take office this month. As they do, we hope they will find the stories and resources in "Mission Support Memo" helpful as they talk about the importance of Mission Support to synod and churchwide ministries. If you have a story we should tell or if our team can accompany you in any way, please reach out!

In gratitude,
Victoria Flood, Senior Director for Congregation and Synod Support
Nick Kiger, Director for Mission Support
Karen Kretschmann, Coordinator for Storytelling Engagement

