

# Pastor's Toolkit

How do we talk about the children and families who are fleeing violence in Central America?



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# Basic overview

**A**s you are no doubt aware, since last October nearly 60,000 Central American children have arrived the United States without a parent or guardian, seeking safety. You may also know that the conditions children are fleeing are frequent “join or die” gang recruitment, human trafficking, sexual violence, often daily extortion, violence by drug cartels, social cleansing by abusive police forces, and deep poverty. Schools are often ground-zero for gang terror, with reported forced recruitment of children as young as six. Violence in the region is so extreme that each of the three countries of Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala rank among the top eight for murder rates in the world. Honduras has the highest murder rate of 90 murders per 100,000 persons per year.

While all of us pray for our loved ones to live in a safe neighborhood, the tragic reality of pervasive violence in these countries and the inability and often unwillingness of regional governments to protect their citizens or bring perpetrators to justice, has compelled families to relocate multiple times. Many families first attempt to find a safe place to live in a different neighborhood, then a different city and, finally, different countries. Like the United States, Nicaragua, Belize, Costa Rica, Panama and Mexico have also experienced a dramatic increase in the number of asylum applications from children and adults fleeing violence in Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador. Some parents have had to make the agonizing decision to send their children to seek safety due to the very real threats to their children’s lives. Their stories are heartbreaking and remind us of biblical stories, like that of the family of Moses who sent their baby away to escape certain death at the hands of Pharaoh. They also

lead us to recall the trauma of Jesus’ entire family who fled to Egypt to escape from Herod’s wrath so soon after his birth.

A recent study conducted by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), looked at 400 interviews with unaccompanied children who traveled from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras to the United States and found that 58 percent of these children had legitimate claims to international protection. Although each child is reviewed individually by a child welfare specialist (a protection some in Congress and the White House shamefully want to remove), many of them then have to then fight for the protection they so desperately need in court without legal representation. Imagine a six year old child trying to argue his or her case in court without a lawyer. In addition to being unreasonable and unjust, recent evidence has emerged that unaccompanied children represented by a legal advocate in immigration court have a 400 percent better chance than unrepresented children of being able to stay in the United States.

Some decision-makers in Washington are also are trying to short-circuit the whole process of applying for asylum by requiring a traumatized child to present their case within 48 hours of entering the country. Many faith leaders across the nation, joined by immigration advocates and lawyers and the National Association of Immigration Judges, have objected to these proposals, explaining that they would place children fleeing trafficking or persecution at risk of being deported to torture or death.

## **For more information:**

[interfaithimmigration.org/resources/august-recess-actions](https://interfaithimmigration.org/resources/august-recess-actions)

[UNHCR: Children on the run](#)

# Sermon Seeds

## **Story of Moses**

*Exodus 2:1-10*

Pharaoh vowed to kill all newborn Hebrew baby boys. When Moses is born his mother hides him and when he is 3 months old she sends him off in a basket down the river, hoping that he would be found and saved. What does Moses' mother have in common with mothers who let their children travel thousands of miles seeking refuge from death threats and violence?

## **Story of Mary, Joseph and Jesus**

*Matthew 2:1-23*

After Jesus is born Herod tries to find him and have him killed. Jesus' parents go first to Egypt then to Nazareth to protect him. Meanwhile baby boys two years and under are being murdered throughout Bethlehem and surrounding vicinities. Imagine the lamentation throughout the region and the influx of refugees in areas outside of Herod's targeted locations. How does this story speak to the current humanitarian crisis of children fleeing from Central America under the threat of death, rape, and gang violence?

## **Let the little children come to me**

*Matthew 19:13-14*

Children flock to Jesus to be blessed. The disciples shoo the children away. As is the case in our own society, children were given little status or space to talk with public leaders. Jesus chose to receive the children as a witness and symbol of the common good and manifestation of the realm of God on earth, "for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." Now we are also called to receive the Central American children who face grave violence in their home countries. Or will we be like the disciples who wanted to turn the children away?

## **Joseph sold into slavery**

*Lectionary text Aug. 10<sup>th</sup>, Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28*

When greed and vengeance take over the human consciousness Joseph is sold into slavery by his own brothers and trafficked to Egypt. Children fleeing Central America are subject to the same plight, both before leaving their home country and also en route to a place of refuge. Consider how God used this situation to

deliver Israel from famine and how the church can be used as a tool to save these Central American children today by keeping humanitarian protection laws in place and working to provide pro-bono legal services.

## **Foreigners who serve the Lord**

*Lectionary text for August 17<sup>th</sup> Isaiah 56:1, 6-8*

Maintain justice and do what is right, warns the prophet Isaiah. Justice and right action includes embracing the "foreigner" for the house of the Lord will be known as "the house of prayer for all nations." Compare this text to the type of legislation recently passed in the House of Representatives that serves to expedite the removal of Central American children fleeing violence.

## **Midwives stand up for immigrant community**

*Lectionary text for August 24<sup>th</sup>, Exodus 1:8-2:10*

The ruling super power of Egypt was threatened by the changing demographics of the immigrant community. Even though the Israelites had been in Egypt for several generations they were still considered "outsiders" and were severely oppressed. Hebrew midwives were ordered to kill the first-born boys in order to decrease the Hebrew population. They refused and the midwives actions were rewarded by God. How does this story relate to the current context of immigration? Consider the midwives response to Pharaoh's edict verses their response grounded in faith values and commitment to God.

## **Love in action**

*Lectionary text for August 31, Romans 12:9-21*

We are called to a radical love ethic and hospitality that extends beyond our comfort zones and familiar relationships. Love in action means sharing joys and sorrows, feeding our enemies, and overcoming evil with good. We are to "Live in harmony with one another." As we consider this text in relations to the larger immigration issue and the children from Central America seeking refuge, we must ask ourselves: Are we demonstrating what it means to welcome and show hospitality to the stranger? What should be our response to those who seek to reject the disenfranchised and turn them away?

# Prayer for children and families in crisis

*The Apostle Paul, in his poetic vision painting of how our faith communities could be in Ephesians, Chapter 3, said God's plan for deep love and wide warmth put him on his knees in prayer. Let us join him in that as we seek for a love that full and broad to be communicated from our homeland to the arriving children and their families:*

God, whose spirit migrated over the waters of chaos before creation to bring it beauty and order, we remember the fleeing children and their families here today because of those conversations that have taken place in the hush of the night in Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala and elsewhere among families aching for an exit from extortion, violence, murders, and poverty.

We gather because of wrenching decisions to board “The Beast” for transit, to corral coy and costly coyotes and journey north—not for what can be gotten...but because staying safe in untenable conditions is most often no longer even an option. We gather because the children are gathered right now, ages two and ten and teens—on trails and in teams and with trauma and near tragedy—TRYING to leave terrors behind and find safety among us.

COMFORT them, Lord!

When many in our land have said the solution to their pain is to expedite their removal more quickly—GIVE OUR GOVERNMENT AND ALL LEADERS  
FAR MORE COMPASSIONATE RESPONSES.

When busloads have been denied access points for care by cars full of those who have come to push them back with their shouts—BE THAT STILL, SMALL VOICE  
THAT BUILDS TO AN EVER PRESENT ROAR FOR JUSTICE AND WELCOME!

When families on all sides of borders are searching for hope to be reunited and find help in this world where you gave us more than enough to share—MAY THE STRENGTH OF YOUR HOLY SPIRIT BE WHAT IS FOUND AND FELT—IN EACH PERSON AND IN OUR POLICIES.

And when souls of the children feel like parched plants from their real desert wanderings—God, COME HOME TO THEIR HEARTS AND OURS, AND GIVE THEM ROOTS DEEP IN THE SOIL OF GOD'S MARVELOUS LOVE UNTIL WE ALL CAN ACT KNOWING AND TRUSTING JUST HOW DEEP AND HOW WIDE YOUR LOVE REALLY IS.

You have brought us here to hear their cries.  
Make our hearts open now  
and give us the power to understand and to respond.  
AMEN.

*Written by Rev. Dr. Sharon Stanley-Rea, Director, Refugee & Immigration Ministries,  
Christian Church, Disciples of Christ*

# Worship litanies

## Awareness

**ONE:** Today, more than 10 million immigrants living in the United States find themselves without the hope of becoming citizens and reuniting with family members. Yet many of them have lived and worked in our communities for years performing tasks that enhance our quality of life. They are our friends. They are our family. They are us.

**ALL:** **Oh God open our eyes that we may see, open our ears that that we may hear and soften our hearts that we may have compassion for the least of these. For we were once strangers and you invited us in.**

**ONE:** Mothers and fathers lament the lost of their children who have vanished into the sea, the desert and the unknown. They are lost in the detention centers. They are hiding in fear. They have died on the journey. They are our friends. They are our family. They are us.

**ALL:** **Oh God open our eyes that we may see, open our ears that that we may hear and soften our hearts that we may have compassion for the least of these. For we were once strangers and you invited us in.**

**ONE:** They have come from all over the world at the beckoning of mother liberty's call to the tired and poor huddled masses yearning to breathe free. They found no welcome at Ellis Island, no line to stand in. They are our friends. They are our family. They are us.

**ALL:** **Oh God open our eyes that we may see, open our ears that that we may hear and soften our hearts that we may have compassion for the least of these. For we were once strangers and you invited us in.**

## A Call to Action

**ONE:** God has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what is required of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God

**ALL:** **We pray for our politicians and decision makers that they may develop an immigration reform policy rooted in love, reflects mercy, is consistent with humanitarian values, supports families, provides a pathway to citizenship for workers already in the U.S., and examines solutions to address the root causes of migration.**

**ONE:** God has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what is required of you but to do justice

**ALL:** **As people of faith in a society still divided by race and increasingly divided into haves and have nots, we pray for and affirm a vision of community in which every neighbor is valued as a child of God. In a world fractured by suspicion of those who are "other," we have heard and adhere to the command to welcome the strangers.**

**ONE:** God has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what is required of you but to love kindness.

**ALL:** **God of grace, love and mercy we seek your guidance on this issue of great importance. Give us wisdom, compassion and courage. Let us be instruments of your miracle working power to heal this broken world.**

**ONE:** God has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what is required of you but to walk humbly with your God.

**ALL:** **We commit ourselves in love, hope and faith to be the instruments of peace and pursuers of justice.**

*Litanies written by Rev. Aundrea Alexander, Esq. National Coordinator-Office of Immigration and Refugee Services, American Baptist Home Mission Societies.*

# Stories of unaccompanied children

**Nodwin**, an 11-year old from **Honduras**: “Big people force the children to sell bad things, and if they don’t do it, they rape them or they kill them.” Nodwin once witnessed a boy his own age gang-raped in a neighborhood park after the child refused to join a local drug gang. “They were stripping a kid naked, and I went to tell the kid’s mom. Later, I went home, but I didn’t want to leave my house, because they could have done the same thing to me.” ([PBS NewsHour, 6/20/14](#))

**Maritza**, a 15-year old from **El Salvador** reported the following: I am here because the gang threatened me. One of them “liked” me. Another gang member told my uncle that he should get me out of there because the guy who liked me was going to do me harm. In El Salvador they take young girls, rape them and throw them in plastic bags. My uncle told me it wasn’t safe for me to stay there. ([UNCHR report](#))

An older man with two granddaughters, ages seven and 10, said: “I left Honduras because they already killed three of my four sons. I can’t stay to wait for them to take away my granddaughters. There the gangs kill for anything, take our houses, our pay. Everything.” Asked if he wanted to go home, a six-year-old Honduran boy began to cry and told the reporter: “They kill people there, and you can’t play.” ([La Jornada, 6/29/14](#))

**Kevin**, a 17-year old from **Honduras**, reported the following: My grandmother wanted me to leave. She told me: “If you don’t join, the gang will shoot you. If you do join, the rival gang will shoot you—or the cops will shoot you. But if you leave, no one will shoot you.” ([UNCHR report](#))

**Kevin Briseño**, 18, and his friend **Omar Barrera**, 19, from **El Salvador**, both spoke about why it may be a death sentence for those who try to leave but are caught and sent back. One friend fled a year and a half ago after he was threatened and gang members murdered his father, a policeman. Their friend was trying to reach his mother in Maryland, but he was stopped in Mexico and returned to San Salvador. “**He was murdered the week after he got back**,” Barrera said, shaking his head. ([The Desert Sun, 7/13/14](#))

A family in Guatemala City received a knock on the door. Standing there were several gang members with one demand. “We’ve come to take your daughter,” they said, according to one of our local Church World Service partners. “Our boss wants her.” It was an emergency and the family had to act quickly. The young teenage girl had no choice but to leave the country the next day, for her own protection. In the words of a local pastor who helped them, “Her sin was simply being pretty.”

**Maria** was 12 years old, when she was kidnapped at gunpoint and taken to a home where she was held captive. She was beaten and raped on an almost daily basis and eventually forced into prostitution. Because of this she became pregnant and gave birth to a girl while captive. Maria fled with her child, riding on top of trains so that they might escape the sexual bondage. *Maria ended up qualifying for a T-visa and is currently doing well. She has now graduated high school.*

**Carlos**, a 13 year old boy from El Salvador, fled to the U.S. after witnessing his mother’s brutal murder. Four gunmen broke into Carlos’s home and shot Carlos’s mother right in front of him. The gunmen were never caught, which led to the child and family feeling afraid in their community. The child suffered from severe trauma because of this event. Due to this, his family in El Salvador decided to send him to live with a relative in the U.S. where he would not be in danger of his life and have better care. *A child like Carlos might apply for asylum.*

*\* Names have been changed to protect identities.*

*Stories taken from the Church World Service August Recess Toolkit, [interfaithimmigration.org/resources/august-recess-actions](http://interfaithimmigration.org/resources/august-recess-actions)*

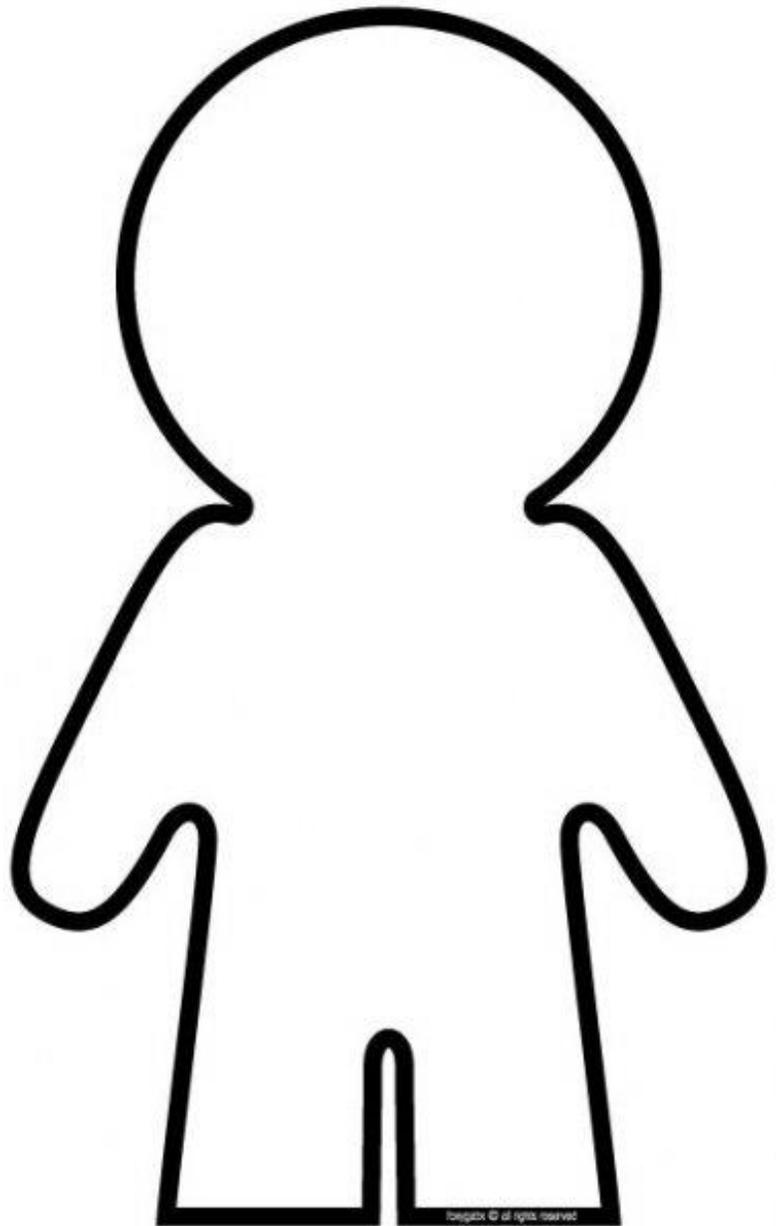
# Simple action

## Make a difference for children: Send a message on a paper doll

After members of your congregation become aware of the violence faced by children fleeing Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador, ask them to write a letter to Congress on a paper doll, emphasizing that these children need protection in the United States. This is a great activity for after-worship time, Sunday school lessons, Bible studies, youth groups, etc - even during a sermon (put a blank paper doll in the bulletin!). The letters should be short and from the heart, and can include drawings and Bible verses such as Matthew 18:5, or the stories of Moses and Jesus, Mary and Joseph.

Sample language could be "I am writing about unaccompanied children feeling violence in Central America. These are God's children. Please allow them to seek safety in the United States. Please do not eliminate anti-trafficking laws that are meant to help them. We pray for these children, and we pray for you as you make decisions that impact their lives."

When you have collected the paper dolls, you can send them to your Senators and Representatives, perhaps making copies so that you can send them to various offices. These addresses can be found at [www.senate.gov](http://www.senate.gov) and [www.house.gov](http://www.house.gov). If it is easier for you, you can just send them to Church World Service at Suite 404, 110 Maryland Avenue, NE, Washington, DC 20002. Just include the name and address of your congregation, and we will deliver them to the right congressional offices.



For more ideas for actions your congregation can take to advocate for children and families, visit: [interfaithimmigration.org/resources/august-recess-actions](http://interfaithimmigration.org/resources/august-recess-actions)