Accompaniment by the Catholic Church

Ashley Feasley and Todd Scribner

The Catholic Church is developing various initiatives to assist those fleeing violence in the Northern Triangle of Central America.

With its extensive network of religious orders, local and diocesan organisations, and research institutes, the Catholic Church is one of the principal institutions engaged in accompaniment efforts in the Northern Triangle of Central America[1]. For example, local Catholic leaders have worked with Protestant leaders to develop lines of communication between rival gangs in El Salvador, including the facilitation of a recent truce between competing parties.[2] Catholic Relief Services, meanwhile, provides school re-entry opportunities, job training and social services to boys and girls in areas of low economic opportunity and high violence. And a variety of Catholic welcome centres – shelters – are located throughout the region to provide support to migrants along their journey.[3]

The Catholic network faces three challenges in particular: firstly, ensuring communication with what is an extremely mobile population; secondly, the need for institutional mapping of services; and, thirdly, scaling up the capacity of the existing network. With respect to the first challenge, a central difficulty is the temporary nature of the relationship. Some migrants will remain in a shelter for only a few hours, others for a night or two. However long they stay, once they leave there are few mechanisms for providing continued support over the course of their journey.

A promising new effort to promote continued communication with migrants was recently launched under the oversight of Fr Juan Luis Carbajal, a Scalabrinian priest in Guatemala City. Fr Carbajal is employing technology to allow advocates to track migrants as they are in transit. Before migrants cross the border from Guatemala into Mexico, Fr Cabajal's team collects a wide range of demographic and personal information about each migrant, uploading it to a central database; this information will then be accessible to shelter workers via an app available for download by administrators at the shelters.[4] With this, they can anticipate arrivals and needs, and also keep track of migrants as they move from the Guatemalan border and arrive at their next transit point in Mexico or elsewhere. Over time, this information could provide a wealth of information that could be used to better understand migration trends and practices. It could also be put to more practical uses including, for example, in family tracing efforts.

For assistance to be provided more effectively, there need to be open lines of communication between centres and a clear understanding of where such centres are located, who runs them, and how they can more effectively share information. In relation to this, the Catholic Center for Migration Studies in New York and the Scalabrini International Migration Network are trying to systematise data collection from the Scalabrini shelters across Mexico and Central America. The problem confronting the international community with respect to forced migration situations is bigger than any one institution can tackle. Ultimately, better collaboration among Catholic service providers and between Catholic groups and their non-Catholic religious and secular counterparts would significantly improve efforts to engage and protect migrant populations.

Ashley Feasley *AFeasley@usccb.org*
Director of Policy and Public Affairs

Todd Scribner *TScribner@usccb.org*
Education Outreach Coordinator

Migration and Refugee Services, US Conference of Catholic Bishops w*ww.justiceforimmigrants.org*

1. Also now referred to as Northern Central America.

2. International Crisis Group (2017) *Mafia of the Poor: Gang Violence and Extortion in Central America* http://bit.ly/ICG-Mafia-2017

3. See article by Alejandro Olayo-Méndez in this issue.

4. To date, the app has primarily been used in Guatemala but its use is being expanded into Mexico. Testing of the app will include ensuring the security of individuals' personal information.