



Seeking Hope Amid Despair in Central America

An action of the 225th General Assembly (2022)



Approved by the 225th General Assembly (2022)
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

Developed by
The Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP)
of the General Assembly Mission Council/Presbyterian Mission Agency
www.pcusa.org/acswp or www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/acswp
See also www.justiceUnbound.org for current discussion



Recommendations

In response to an action by the 223rd General Assembly (2018), the 225th General Assembly (2022) approves the following recommendations for the church's mission and witness and receives the rationale and appended study paper and other resources on theology, policy and mission development:

1. **Public Witness:** The 225th General Assembly encourages all Presbyterians, sessions, presbyteries and other councils, and directs the agencies of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), in particular the Office of Public Witness in Washington, D.C., and the Presbyterian Ministry at the U.N., to advocate with the United States and other governments to:
 - a. Defend and support democratic processes and elections, judicial independence and accountability, and international efforts to combat corruption and impunity in Central America.
 - b. Support ecumenical Christian and interfaith efforts to renew human rights covenants, strengthen multilateral human rights agreements among states and safeguard the enforcement of international law.
 - c. Reinforce Central American-led initiatives for regional political, economic and cultural integration, including the freedom to travel across borders.
 - d. Advocate funding for culturally informed and nonviolent public health measures to address the following: femicide, intrafamilial violence, restrictions on contraception and reproductive rights and persecution of LGBTQ+ communities.
 - e. Affirm the church's advocacy for the reform of U.S. immigration and asylum policies so that they respond to the human need in Central America described in this report.
 - f. Promote just and sustainable economic empowerment strategies in Central America. Such strategies would include advocacy for living wages and labor rights for workers in Central America, as well as investment by governments and the private sector in job creation as part of development agendas to mitigate the desperation that drives many to emigrate. Such agendas would include the following as points of departure:
 - i. Work to ensure that trade agreements strengthen local economies, preserve ecological sustainability and reduce dependency on debt;
 - ii. Encourage the World Bank, Interamerican Development Bank and IMF to support more investment in public goods and social infrastructure, rather than the privatization and deregulation that have increased inequality.
 - iii. Recognize that all international investment needs greater transparency and accountability to prevent corruption.
 - g. Support increased international efforts to monitor and implement judicial reform to challenge state corruption and impunity in Central America.
 - h. Deepen cross-cultural conversation about climate change and issues of environmental justice between the United States and Central America.
2. **Mission Partnerships and Solidarity with Church Partners:** The 225th General Assembly directs the Presbyterian Mission Agency, in consultation with its ecumenical and humanitarian programs, to:
 - a. Sustain the recruitment and affirm the role of mission co-workers in cooperation with church



- partners, ecumenical and interdenominational institutions in the Central American region.
- b. Increase community mediation, conflict resolution, advocacy, theological education and pastoral accompaniment of marginalized communities, as well as the bridging between U.S. and Central American cultures and churches.
 - c. Accompany Central American church, ecumenical and interfaith partners as they guide and develop leaders for church and society who understand the multiple dimensions of conflict in the region and have the intercultural competence to be effective peacemakers in our interconnected world.
 - d. Restore the Young Adult Volunteer program presence in the region along with increasing opportunities for international education and exchange opportunities.
 - e. Strengthen PC(USA) Mission Networks for education, relationship-building, building shared spiritual resources and solidarity in witness for human rights. Commit to shared Bible study, theological reflection and critical theological analysis of the evolving social context through mission partnerships.
 - f. Encourage our PC(USA)-related colleges, universities and seminaries to deepen ethical and theological as well as political, economic and historical understanding of the connections between our nations and peoples, giving particular concern to the rights and character of Indigenous and African-descended peoples and the role of Protestantism in a changing ecumenical context.
 - g. From the wealth of material in the background paper, direct ACSWP to coordinate the creation of a Study Guide to help congregations, seminary professors and faith-formation teachers to disseminate the ideas in this report.
3. Education and Formation for Transformation in Congregations: The 225th General Assembly invites and encourages PC(USA) congregations and presbyteries to:
- a. Engage Central American migrants through acts of hospitality and accompaniment.
 - b. Engage Central Americans already among us by sharing faith stories: “What have we seen and felt together? How have our experiences of hope and hardship connected us with our experience of God’s grace?”
 - c. Provide space to listen to opponents of oppressive regimes in Central America. Our Reformed theology calls us to be a critical witness for individual leaders and political movements that promote social justice.
 - d. Sign up for advocacy alerts from the PC(USA) Office of Public Witness, and the Washington-based Latin America Working Group (lawg.org), of which the PC(USA) is a partner. Pay particular attention to, and respond to, alerts related to issues raised in this report and respond with appropriate advocacy to elected political representatives.
 - e. Read and reflect upon the appended study paper, its suggested resources and the upcoming study guide to understand the breadth and depth of the historic and current challenges confronting our Central American siblings in their faith pilgrimages.

Rationale

We celebrate our longstanding relationships — dating back to 1882 — with mission partners in the



region of Central America. This work is grounded in the understanding that it is the Spirit of the God of Creation and the Christ of Reconciliation who moves the PC(USA) to accompany those who work for justice, freedom and peace both in Central America and in the United States. To many in the U.S., the face of Christ in Central America is unknown; this report seeks to help us better recognize Christ's presence in renewed defense of justice and sustainable lifeways. Prompted in part by waves of brave migrants and asylum-seekers and by those who seek life with dignity while remaining in their homelands, we seek to understand and challenge trends that have developed in Central America since the 1980s. As our partners strive to reopen springs of hope, we whose lives are entwined with theirs seek to attend to both cries of lamentation and signs of the life-giving Spirit in our midst.

We engaged as a denomination and listened intently to our Central American siblings during the 1980s when revolutionary promises clashed with closed political systems, and hundreds of thousands of people suffered dislocation, disappearance and death. Multiple visits with our partners produced candid and substantial reports to the General Assembly in 1983, 1987, and 1988. The newly reunited PC(USA) challenged U.S. policy in the region and chose to walk in Christian solidarity with our Central American siblings in the midst of conflict. These reports authorized significant advocacy for human rights, opposition to the Contra war and support for the Sanctuary Movement. Their conclusions and recommendations framed the response of our church until negotiated peace accords emerged and were achieved in the 1990s. General Assembly recognized this change in a brief 1995 resolution, "Marathon of Hope."

The peace accords of the 1990s promised prosperity and life. Central American leaders strengthened longstanding attempts to integrate the region's economies, and to establish stronger trade relations with the U.S., Europe, and China, while literacy and life expectancy increased markedly in the region. Women began to assume greater protagonism in this period as they occupied key political positions and in society, and the LGBTQ+ community began to experience greater acceptance. Churches and NGOs proliferated in Central America to address short term social needs even as post-Cold War U.S. and Europe turned their attention away from Latin America. A resolute hope produced substantive progress in postwar Central America in the final decade of the 20th century. Central Americans experienced real steps toward political democratization and economic prosperity from expanded trade.

Central Americans witnessed a reversal of many of these gains during the first two decades of the 21st century. Natural disasters frustrated growth and opportunity, the drug wars expanded their presence in Central America, while political actors — whether politicians or leaders of street gangs or drug cartels — undermined calls for transparency and turned to the darkness of corruption to reinforce control and influence. Democratic hopes morphed into a narco-influenced kleptocracy. And, ultimately, the pandemic has hammered already fragile economies.

Several natural disasters ravaged the isthmus since the signing of the peace agreements. Hurricane Mitch devastated Honduras and Nicaragua in 1998, earthquakes in El Salvador severely damaged the infrastructure in 2001, and then a significant drought corridor emerged extending from Guatemala



through Nicaragua due to changes in the El Niño-Southern Oscillation. In November 2020, hurricanes Eta and Iota destroyed crops and homes. The hurricanes severely damaged the fragile infrastructure in Nicaragua, Honduras, and Guatemala, all within a two-week window. Widespread homelessness and hunger became the stark reality even as COVID-19 emerged forcefully in the region. Environmental changes and disruptions have intensified economic suffering, contributing to long-term instability and prompting Central Americans to emigrate.

In the wake of the onslaught of natural disasters and the havoc unleashed by COVID-19, femicide and domestic violence have become more pronounced even as church and civic leaders struggle to advocate for temperance, justice and peace in families and communities. Simultaneously, authoritarian regimes became even more negligent, and even openly hostile, toward the LGBTQ+ community.

Since early 2020, the COVID-19 crisis has further exacerbated economic inequality, corruption and the descent into both gang control of regions and government authoritarianism. This decay took place despite valiant attempts by civil society and churches, with the support of international bodies, to reinforce the rule of law and judicial accountability, to battle systemic corruption, to support victims of climate change and disease, and to expand public investment in the poorest sectors of societies.

The June 2009 coup in Honduras marked a key step toward an authoritarian model in Central America where one party has worked to dominate the executive, judicial and legislative branches with significant acquiescence and even encouragement from parts of the U.S. government. National elections in Honduras at the end of 2021 offered a glimmer of hope with the victory of Xiomara Castro and the Freedom Party, making her the nation's first female president and offering Hondurans respite from the corruption and inefficacy of the ruling National Party. Castro's proposal for an assembly to rewrite the nation's constitution will likely be controversial, and the transition of power itself may be tenuous.

Meanwhile, in Nicaragua, the Ortega family co-opted or eliminated their political competition, consolidated control of the legislature, and strengthened its clientelist relationship with much of civil society — including many religious groups. Attempts to reform Nicaragua's social security system backfired in early 2018, and protests were met with harsh repression in which more than 300 people lost their lives. Up to 100,000 Nicaraguans have sought refuge — primarily in Costa Rica — even as the Sandinista government arrested seven opposition candidates in the runup to the November 2021 elections.

The move to authoritarian governing is also evident in El Salvador, where President Nayib Bukele also has purged political opponents. The practice of corruption with impunity is also a region-wide trend, with the Guatemalan and Honduran governments closing down the internationally supported anti-corruption missions in 2019 and 2020 respectively (International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala and the Mission to Support the Fight against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras).

The number of citizens fleeing a decaying political and economic situation in Central America's northern

region increased dramatically in 2014. For the first time, U.S. immigration officials detained large numbers of unaccompanied minors from these countries. Since 2000, more than 1.5 million Central Americans — mostly Guatemalans, El Salvadorans and Hondurans — abandoned their homes and risked their lives to attempt a dangerous journey through Mexico to the United States. Numbers soared again in 2020–21, spurred by the confluence of environmental devastation and the global pandemic.

To shed light on the challenges confronting Christian mission and witness today, this report explores the convergence of these internal and external factors throughout Central America since the early 1990s to illuminate the challenges confronting Christian mission and witness today. Our study team visited five of the seven Central American countries (Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Costa Rica) in 2019, listening intently to the voices of our church and ecumenical partners, and meeting with political and economic representatives. In 2021 we updated many of these conversations using Zoom. Our study of the seismic shifts in the region leads us to lift up these focal points:

- La violencia, pan nuestro de cada día.

We heard this Spanish phrase in each country: “Our daily bread is violence.” Persistent political and economic disruptions have led to unprosecuted violent acts, particularly violence against women and the LGBTQ+ community. Thousands of Central Americans have been murdered, and any who challenge the powers that be face the threat of detention or death. Current violence exceeds the already grim slaughter attributable to gangs and narco-terrorism, both armed by a flood of weapons.

- A deep sense of betrayal.

Many community leaders who gave most of their adult lives to transform the poorest countries of the region into nations where opportunity existed for all feel deeply betrayed by leaders who amassed wealth and political power at the expense of the vulnerable.

- Un silencio que grita.

Where Central American pastoral leadership fails to denounce oppression, church leaders and theologians confessed that the silence of this leadership is deafening, and that the silence itself cries out for a response.

- Greater impacts of climate change.

Despite areas of stunning natural beauty, intentional deforestation and a growing arid zone are making traditional subsistence farming impossible for increasing numbers of people, creating unendurable food insecurity and malnutrition, and contributing to the forced migration of peoples from Honduras and Guatemala in particular.

- Renewed social and cultural tensions.

Indigenous communities — including many Maya Presbyterian churches — suffer disproportionately both from the lack of social protections and from exploitation at every stage of displacement and emigration. Advocates for human and environmental rights are under increasing threat throughout the region.

- Choosing life and dignity.

Those who have fled their homes are abandoning hopelessness and choosing the possibility of a new life, either in-country or out of country. This desperate step is often a leap of faith toward a better life with dignity.

- Churches in flux.
The base ecclesial communities linked to liberation theology that had seemed to herald a new reformation have all but disappeared while ecumenical coalitions of historic protestant denominations have been marginalized. Neo-Pentecostal churches, making illusory promises of material gains, have gained remarkable space in a few short years.
- Pastoral care in a time of crisis.
Congregations and other communal institutions become disheartened and drained of resources as family members who emigrate encounter very costly and tragic snares along the way, including frequent extortion and kidnapping by both criminal bands and security forces. The pandemic, however, has also led churches in some places to experience pronounced growth in attendance and in demands placed upon the pastoral staff who are shackled by declining resources. Joy, mourning and exhaustion are part of the daily experience and comingle in worship and in theological reflection. Faith still informs the daily struggle of most people in the region, and churches have done remarkable work in online pastoral accompaniment in the context of the pandemic. For displaced people, there is a profound need for sustaining spiritual engagement.
- Mutual accountability.
Our journey in Central America leads us to recommit ourselves to a common journey of accompaniment and accountability. Informed by our Reformed confessional tradition, we engage in relationships of mutual reflection, critique and, ultimately, shared hope. We must learn to listen in the face of complex realities wherein too often lies are turned into “truth” and hearts are hardened so that we cannot see the idolatry in our own lifeways nor hear the voices of people who are marginalized by systemic injustice and threats to well-being.
- Solidarity and accompaniment.
There is a continuing but changing role for mission co-workers who are now (as was the study team) increasingly binational, bicultural, and bilingual or multilingual couples, assisting U.S. and partner churches in bridging political and social obstacles. Many partnerships between PC(USA) congregations and presbyteries, and with congregations and organizations in Central America, increasingly tie us together in common pilgrimage.
- A critique of the abuse of power.
In today’s consumer society, the “health and wealth gospel” has overpowered many congregations. People of faith struggle to challenge this view by living out a prophetic critique, rooted in the words and practice of Jesus, of the unjust use of power. This theological work, responding closely to historical and current documentation and research, as well as the lived experience of our partners, led the study team to develop a separate study resource for those in our churches who want to develop a deeper understanding of what is at stake.
- Sustain and strengthen participatory democracy.
We call on U.S. government officials to engage, sustain, and strengthen participatory democracy and democratic institutions in the region. U.S. ideals and interests should align to support local, regional and international efforts for accountability and transparency, and to denounce all forces that abet corruption, undermine the rule of law, imperil free and fair elections, and jeopardize effective governance, judicial review and legislative processes. Furthermore, history teaches us that U.S.



military intervention exacerbates inequality in the region and damages participatory democratic institutions.

This work is a testimony to the depths of despair and to signs of hope in a region whose destiny is closely intertwined with our own. A humane and theologically informed response to our historical relationship with Central America, the current migration crisis, the pandemic, climate change and the political stalemate in Nicaragua requires us to embrace the life-giving power of the Spirit and to imagine a world shaped by the heavenly banquet that is the essence of our communion around the table of the crucified and risen Christ.

As North American Christians, we share an identity with our Central American siblings both as Americans and as followers of Jesus. In this we have a shared destiny and thus are called to a relationship of mutual respect and support. We acknowledge that unequal power frustrates and hinders our path toward solidarity with each other. We are compelled to stand in solidarity with our Central American siblings as they seek to gain the power to create their own destiny, to become “the agents of their own history.”

We join the call of prophets and martyrs, who have organized a broad-based ecumenical movement known for sanctuary and resistance to a sinful status quo, to make these recommendations while recognizing our long-term partnership and common service to God’s mission.





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