

# *You Were Aliens*

*Mexican-United States Immigration and the Church's Response*

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Suffering from deep economic struggle, Yolanda left Guatemala with her children heading for work in Tijuana. When she could find no work in Mexico, her family immigrated illegally to find work in the US in 1989 to look for a better life—miraculously walking past the border patrol unnoticed. For years she struggled to make it in the U.S. She worked hard to get proper documentation for herself and her family but was constantly denied. In the U.S. she had enough to survive, her children were getting an education, and her family was together. While living in the U.S. she had another child who, being born in the U.S., was a citizen and will never be forced to leave the country. After spending somewhere around \$10,000 on lawyers while working marginal jobs in order to get proper documentation and more permanent status in the U.S., she was still ordered to deport and leave the country. After almost 20 years of living in the United States, struggling but surviving better than she and her family would in Guatemala, the U.S. government gave her the final notice to leave the country. Faced with the choice of leaving the states and her US born daughter behind or staying in the US illegally, Yolanda sought refuge from the only place she knew—the church. Yolanda’s story is not an unusual one. Though she and her family have live in the U.S. for 18 years, in this political system Yolanda; a hard working, funny, warm, and loving person is simply illegal.

This paper will examine the current problems in Mexico and the United States which cause or involve Mexican immigration. We will seek to understand the biblical identity and the ethical responsibility of the Church, then discuss what a church of such an identity might do in response to Mexican-United States immigration. We do not seek to investigate this complex, historical issue at every economic and political level. Due to the brevity of this paper all we will examine are some of the socio-economic pushes and pulls upon the people involved, how the

church should view these immigrants and work toward restoration. This paper suggests that the church, as an alternative society and as *koinonia*, must seek the best interests of the Mexican immigrants over against the interests of U.S. economic system.

### **Part I. Ecclesiology**

The church is a movement of people, moving in response to the calling of God in Jesus, through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. This calling is an invitation to partner with God in God's dynamic and creative activity in the world. The church is both an alternative society and it is *koinonia* (welcoming community). Seen together these models capture the tension in which the church exists—both resistive and welcoming. The church resists the things which are in opposition to the life-giving work of God, toward the purpose of solidarity and justice among all people. The church, established in Jesus was meant to be a “new society,” a kingdom of God on earth, in the midst of dominating pagan societies.<sup>1</sup>

#### *The Church as an Alternative Society*

The church, as an alternative society, resists the oppressive principalities and powers of the world and seeks to live out and establish the Kingdom of God. Its' allegiance lies with God, rather than with whatever governmental or socio-political authorities may be in place. A Christian does not see his or herself, for example, primarily as an American or a Mexican, but simply as a Christian—a Christian who happens to live in a particular place. There are no borders within the church. The laws of God are the laws of the church; the authority of government is secondary to the purposes of God's work in the world. The church, historically, has generally failed at being an alternative society. Currently in America, the distinction between the church and the state is difficult to articulate. On a philosophical level, the American church has aligned itself so closely with the state that patriotism is almost a prerequisite to Christianity.

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<sup>1</sup>David Watson, *I Believe in the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1978) 52

The church has fallen into national mentality and approaches political and social issues with American agendas rather than with a Kingdom agenda. We are concerned about America before we are concerned about our neighbors and oppressed people, this is backwards prioritizing. This would have at least been anomalous from the perspective of the early Christians.

Though the early Christians are often idealized and placed on a pedestal for sharing possessions among one another (Acts 4:32) and being “of one mind” (Philippians 2:2), they were not without conflict. There were conflicts between Jews and Hellenized Jews and between Jews and Gentiles.<sup>2</sup> Though they were not totally united, there was a consciousness of their unique identity as the “true Israel” and as an alternative society.<sup>3</sup> They began separating themselves from anything which was opposed to the mission of God in which they were participating and, at the expense of breaking the law. They identified the Roman Empire as an oppressive system and sought to separate themselves from the Authority of the Roman Empire and to rise against it. They refused to participate in the Roman “Emperor Cult,” refusing to worship the emperor and participate in Roman religion.<sup>4</sup> They also refused to participate in political coercion, which was primarily a force of domination. The early Christians resisted the temptation to dominate, even within a society which was so oriented toward domination.<sup>5</sup> Any Roman law which contradicted the laws of the church were more or less ignored and disobeyed. They did not buy into the class distinctions made by the majority society—both rich and poor, slave and free were equals in this alternative society.<sup>6</sup> The church also refrained from Military participation.<sup>7</sup> They even separated themselves from classical education—Tertullian, who was of this persuasion, said it well, “What

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<sup>2</sup>Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity Vol.1* (New York: Prince Press, 1984) 18

<sup>3</sup>Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus and Community*, Trans. by John Galvin (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984) 2

<sup>4</sup>H.M. Gwatkin, *Early Church History, Vol. 1.* (London: MacMillan & Co., 1912) 77

<sup>5</sup>Lohfink, *Jesus and Community*, 117

<sup>6</sup>H. Chadwick, *The Early Church* (London: Penguin, 1969) 60

<sup>7</sup>Among all the Roman Legions, according to Tertullian, "not a Christian could be found among them."

does Athens have to do with Jerusalem? What does the academy have to do with the church?”<sup>8</sup>

The early church, due to their resistance against Rome and their refusal to assimilate into the Roman society, suffered great persecution. Many Christians were killed for the cause of keeping their distinct identity—distinct from Rome—as an alternative society.<sup>9</sup> The early church identified oppressive systems and rose up against them, even to the point of death, rather than assimilating with them and embracing their values. The early church believed that acceptance of the state was equal to idolatry, for it placed the worship of pagan god’s equal to the worship of the one true God.<sup>10</sup>

Today the church must reaffirm and resurrect their distinct identity—distinct from the socio-political society—and they must reaffirm and resurrect the mission of identifying and responding to oppressive systems within dominant society. The idolatry of today is much more subtle because there is nothing as obvious as pagan sacrifice as there was in the early centuries of Christianity.<sup>11</sup> The church must display a reversal of the standards of the state, wherever necessary, and a submission to the reign of God within its’ own ranks.<sup>12</sup> The ethical responsibility and the laws of the church are theological, built primarily on the teachings of Jesus found within the Biblical Canonical Scriptures.<sup>13</sup> The teachings of Jesus are a reaffirmation of the intensions which lie at the heart of the Jewish *Torah*: Love God and love neighbor (Leviticus 19:18, Deuteronomy 6:5, and Luke 10:27). The church conducts itself, not by the interests of any government or corporation but by the standards of Jesus’ teachings. The standards of the church are demonstrated in the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ—in his life, death, and

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<sup>8</sup>Tertullian, *Prescription Against Heretics*, 1.7

<sup>9</sup>See Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 33-87 for the persecution under Nero, Domitian, Marcus Aurelius, Septimius Severus, and Decius

<sup>10</sup>Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 53

<sup>11</sup>*ibid.*, 53

<sup>12</sup>Watson, *I Believe in the Church*, 53

<sup>13</sup>William Werpehowski, “Theological Ethics,” in *The Modern Theologians: Second\Ed.*, ed. David Ford (London: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 311-325

resurrection. Throughout Jesus' life, he referred very little to the church but discussed it at length in terms of "Kingdom."<sup>14</sup> Jesus proclaimed good news to those on the under-side of society (Isaiah 61:1 and Luke 4:18), saying "blessed are the poor in spirit" and "blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice" (Matthew 5:1-10). Jesus lived amongst and gave hope to the poorest of the poor and subversively proclaimed vindication, over against Roman authorities, for the most shamed of the society. Jesus' life was revelation of the church's responsibility toward resistance. This resistance was not just for the sake of resistance, but was naturally a part of seeking solidarity with and justice among all people. Jesus' death was the result of a life lived in resistance to oppressive systems—a life lived toward solidarity and peace in the midst of chaos and subjugation.<sup>15</sup> Virgilio Elizondo says it best:

Jesus moved from the culture of sacrificing others for one's own gain to a new culture of sacrificing self for the sake of others. This new culture would become known as Christianity. It is important to see the sacrifice of the cross not as the one sacrifice of Jesus but as the final movement in the sacrificial process of an entire lifetime, a life that refused to victimize anyone. Jesus sacrificed himself in many ways to redeem and rehabilitate the victims of the world. He was the victim who did not become a victimizer. He always offered something new and surprising. He went from being a victim to being a liberator, a generator of new life.<sup>16</sup>

Jesus' death was revelation to the church of the risk of love—the probable outcome of living as an alternative society in opposition to a much more powerful force. But the story of Jesus does not end in suffering and death. Jesus is resurrected—vindicated—by God. The resurrection of Jesus gave hope to early Christians. Resurrection was revelation that the oppressive dominating society does not win in the end—true victory, ironically, belongs to the oppressed, alternative society which seeks solidarity and justice in the face of oppressive systems.

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<sup>14</sup>Watson, *I Believe in the Church*, 52

<sup>15</sup>Dorothee Soelle, *Suffering* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975) 164

<sup>16</sup>Daniel L. Groody, *The Option for the Poor in Christian Theology* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2007) 168

The church's identity as an Alternative Society is important and highly relevant for the church in the United States. We have lost sight of our identity as a "salvific community" and have bent our knees to the State.<sup>17</sup> The church must take Jesus as their example, and live out the call of the cross throughout the world, in the face of dominant society, and be for the world what Jesus was—resisting that which opposes the kingdom of God.<sup>18</sup> We must think of our primary identity as followers of Christ, not as Americans. Thus our decisions should make sense, first, through the lens of that identity, and only secondly should they make sense through the lens of economics and political practicality.

### *The Church as Koinonia*

The church as *koinonia* seeks to invite people into the fellowship of the church and moves toward unity, not only among the church of the present history but toward the invisible church, including those who have come before us.<sup>19</sup> The church is not exclusive, but seeks for all people to share with one another in Jesus Christ. The church takes Jesus' message of love and acceptance to all people and invites them to a common table. Barriers between people, including racial barriers and social-status barriers, are broken and people are invited to share with one another. The church in the United States has commonly failed at being a welcoming community. We have become individualistic and have lost our sense of genuine community.<sup>20</sup> Due to our individualism we have forgotten who our neighbor is.<sup>21</sup>

The early church was very sensitive to the concept of community. The early conception of community was conveyed in the Greek word *koinonia*. The meaning of the word, *koinonia*,

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<sup>17</sup> Lohfink, *Jesus and Community*, 5

<sup>18</sup> N.T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999) 181

<sup>19</sup> William C., Placher, ed., *Essentials of Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003) 238-239

<sup>20</sup> Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus and Community*, 4

<sup>21</sup> Placher, *Essentials of Christian Theology*, 229

embraces concepts best articulated in English as the terms community, communion, joint participation, sharing and intimacy. *Koinonia* often refers, in the New Testament writings, to a jointly contributed gift.<sup>22</sup> This word permeates itself throughout the New Testament, especially in the Epistles (see Acts 2:42, 1 Cor 1:9, 2 Cor 8:4, Ephesians 3:9, Phil 1:5, 3:10, 1 John 1:3, 6-7, 1 Cor 10:16, 2 Cor 13:14, Hebrews 13:16, Philemon 1:6, Romans 15:26, and 2 Cor 9:13). *Koinonia* is best understood as sharing—sharing possessions, sharing sufferings, sharing in joys, sharing in everything. In the Epistles, Paul saw that *koinonia* was essential to the church. When the church selfishly seeks to protect its authority through domination and does not share together serious harm comes to the gospel message.<sup>23</sup> Paul wanted the early church to be of the “same mind” (Phil 2:2) and to unselfishly share with each other in the sufferings of Christ, who is the profound symbol of God in human suffering (Phil 3:10). *Koinonia* was also evangelical, insofar as it was open to everyone, regardless of gender and class distinction (Gal 3:28). The gospel message, carried by the church, to which *koinonia* is essential, was always on the move to new people—the invitation was always extended to people, even those who were unacceptable in Roman society. This was demonstrated most powerfully in the Eucharist celebration. The Eucharist was a meal in which all were invited.

Jesus was the early church’s example of *koinonia*. Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection were all manifestation of *koinonia*. Jesus shared life with “sinners”—those who were unaccepted, even by Jesus’ own religious leaders (Luke 15:1-2). Jesus dining and fellowshiping was a living *koinonia* which embraced all people. Jesus relationship with his disciples was example of this. Jesus embraced and affirmed women, who were traditionally seen as imperfect and lower-class. Jesus spoke endearingly to women and allowed women to touch him (Matthew

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<sup>22</sup>Thayer, Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, 352

<sup>23</sup>Lohfink, *Jesus and Community*, 120

9:22).<sup>24</sup> Jesus even allowed women to follow him as disciples.<sup>25</sup> In one story, Jesus even extends grace to a Samaritan woman, which for a Jew was a great offense (John 4).<sup>26</sup> It could be said that “Jesus was a feminist” in his time.<sup>27</sup> Jesus found great value in women and shared *koinonia* with them, in a society which looked down on women. In Gethsemane, Jesus prayed for the unity of the church, he prayed for *koinonia* (John 17).<sup>28</sup> Jesus’ own disciples were chosen from fishermen (Simon and Andrew) and even tax collectors (Levi), possibly the most despised people in the land. The ultimate demonstration of *koinonia* is what is commonly referred to as “the last supper,” Jesus’ final meal with his disciples (Matthew 26, Mark 14, Luke 22). Here, Jesus displays *koinonia*, not just in the meal itself (though the meal is always a powerful symbol of *koinonia*), but in washing the disciples feet. Jesus not only shares meals and possessions with the lowest in society, in washing the feet of lowly fishermen and tax collectors, Jesus *becomes* the lowest and demonstrates true *koinonia*. In Jesus’ death, he demonstrated *koinonia* at the deepest level. He became the most shamed—being tortured and killed in the most shameful fashion on the time. Crucifixion was a political statement, an example to people of what happens when you oppose Rome. Jesus hung and bled as a symbol of total solidarity—he shared in the suffering of the least in society. God, in Jesus, became a representative of the most poor and victimized people.

Jesus brings together all people—honored and shamed—as God suffering on the cross.

Elsa Tamez says it well: “To believe that God has also been crucified, we see that in the rights of

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<sup>24</sup>With the potential exception of a problematic passage (Matthew 15:26-27), Jesus spoke very respectfully toward women, calling them woman (a term of respect in the ancient world, a term by which Jesus refers to his own mother) and even daughter (Matthew 9:22).

<sup>25</sup>This is implied, for example, in Mary and Martha’s reference to Jesus as “teacher” or “rabbi” (John 11:28, 20:16). This would have been a highly irregular occurrence, for a woman to refer to a Rabbi, and for a Rabbi to allow it and acknowledge such a reference from a woman.

<sup>26</sup>Charles H. Talbert, *Reading John*, (Macon: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2005) 118

<sup>27</sup>Dorothee Soelle, *On Earth as in Heaven*, (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993) 26-27

<sup>28</sup>Placher, *Essentials of Christian Theology*, 229

the poor, persecuted, and crucified Jesus, God's rights are being trampled upon."<sup>29</sup> Jesus, on the cross, demonstrated God's *koinonia* with all of mankind, down to the most subjugated people. "And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!" (Philippians 2:8). It is in the shadow of this demonstration of solidarity that Jesus calls the church to "take up a cross" and follow him (Matthew 16:24). Suffering is a natural result of *koinonia* as long as there is suffering in the world. There cannot be solidarity between peoples if people do not share their sufferings with each other. But Jesus' story does not end in death. Jesus is resurrected—vindicated—by God. The resurrection of Jesus gave hope to early Christians, as revelation that *koinonia* is victorious in the end. Paul see the power of the resurrection—true final victory—as only accessible through suffering (Phil 3:10-11).

The church in the United States must revive *koinonia* in practice. Our culture is generally disconnected from genuine community for there is no need to actually sit down with someone and share life, because one can just as easily send them a text message or an e-mail. We have ultimately lost *koinonia* in the daily life of the church and in the worship of the church, particularly the participation of Eucharist, because we have embraced the values of our dominant American society. It is very difficult and uncomfortable for us to share our possessions, because we are culturally conditioned to expect something in return—someone might say, "my checkbook is my personal property, why would I open it to you?" The church, along with culture, has become increasingly individualistic, so genuine community is uncomfortable and difficult to understand. The concept of sharing in suffering might seem politically and socially impractical to us.

A key way to revive *koinonia* is to practice openness in Eucharist. Eucharistic community carries the tension of being resistive and welcoming. It resists the social ordering of the dominant

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<sup>29</sup>Groody, *The Option for the Poor in Christian Theology*, 48

society and creates community. Eucharist is a lifestyle and it permeates throughout the church's practice.<sup>30</sup> According to Gustavo Gutierrez:

The Eucharist celebration, the central act of the life of the church, synthesizes the fundamental aspects of Christian life: the loving memory of God as expressed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the love for all, and the preference for the most insignificant and forgotten come together. The memory of the ways one should proclaim the good news and be faithful to the design of God's life and to solidarity with others is also included.<sup>31</sup>

Eucharist creates *koinonia*, yet today it has been used as a barrier between people rather than a door. There are prohibitions, in some churches, against certain people to partake in Eucharist. There is such a strive for perfection that people with too much blemish of sin are not permitted to celebrate, as if there is a point where one has too much "sin" to share in the remembrance of the one who bore all sin. The church as *koinonia* welcomes all people to the table fellowship and together we "share in Christ's and each other's affliction and sufferings (Phil. 3:10; 4:14), amid which there is consolation (2 Cor. 1:7) and the promise of participation in joy and future glory (1 Pet. 4:13; 5:1; 2 Pet. 1:4, future sharing in God's own nature)."<sup>32</sup> This is a highly evangelistic practice because all are accepted by God and therefore the invitation to Eucharist is extended to all regardless of social class and racial distinction. The Eucharist carries with it the tensions of resistance and welcome. It resists social barriers and welcomes all to the table.

Because the church is an alternative society, we identify and stand up against oppressive systems within dominant society, all this for the goal of *koinonia*—solidarity among all people.

The church is about the work of God through Jesus in the world—resisting oppression and

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<sup>30</sup>Andrea Bieler and Luise Schottroff, *The Eucharist: Bodies, Bread, and Resurrection* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007) 4-7

<sup>31</sup>Groody, *The Option for the Poor in Christian Theology*, 24

<sup>32</sup>Charles Maahs and Richard Sklba, 1999. *The Church as Koinonia of Salvation: Its Structures and Ministries*, Washington D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, On-Line. Available from internet, <http://www.usccb.org/seia/koinonia.shtml#3>, accessed March 12, 2008.

sharing life with the least in the dominant society. It is by the teachings of Jesus that the church finds its identity. The sacrificial life of Jesus, demonstrated in *koinonia*, drives the church toward glorious vindication in resurrection. In the ears of the church, echoes the voice of the crucified Son of God, saying, “as the Father has sent me so I send you” (John 20:21). It is by this calling we move forward, identifying oppression and standing against it in redemptive community.

## **Part II. Mexican-United States Immigration**

This paper now turns to the problem at hand: Mexican-U.S. immigration. The questions we must begin with are—what are the reasons for Mexican Citizens to cross the border into the U.S.? What are the perceptions about immigration and illegal immigrants in the U.S.? How are the immigrants being treated by Americans and the church in the U.S.? After we have examined these questions we will begin to inquire as to what the church, as an alternative society and as *koinonia*, should be expected to do.

### *From the Immigrant’s Perspective*

No border in the world as long as the border shared between the United States and Mexico has such a drastic economic difference. Mexico and the U.S. share a 1,969 mile border. Minimum wage in the United States is three times higher than the average income in Mexico.<sup>33</sup> So in the face of poverty the reality, for Mexican citizens, is that by crossing an imaginary line on the ground their chances of making a better life for themselves and for their families is radically increased. Mexican citizens who are struggling in Mexico are not oblivious to this dynamic situation. Immigrants can see that their lives could be better if they were to simply cross the line. Even working full-time for under minimum wage would increase their income, and therefore drastically improve their economic situation. Daniel G. Groody reports in his powerful

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<sup>33</sup>Douglas S. Massey, Jorge Durand, and Nolan J. Malone, *Beyond Smoke and Mirrors: Mexican Immigration in an Era of Economic Integration* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation Publications, 2003), 7

book *Border of Life, Valley of Death*, “More than 40 million Mexicans live in poverty and dream of making more than the national wage of 35 cents an hour, or 200 pesos (about \$20) every two weeks.”<sup>34</sup>

Mexican citizens are not only driven by the economic pulls from north of the border but also by economic push from their own country, namely, their own economic poverty. An Immigrant names Mario told that he came to the U.S. not to get rich “but to survive. When we got to the point where we could not even buy necessary things like tortillas, eggs, and sugar, I had to immigrate.”<sup>35</sup> The push is not only economic, but related to this is race. Like in the U.S. the problem of racism plays an important role in the economic landscape in Central America. In Mexico there is still “deep-seated racial antipathy.”<sup>36</sup>

Virgilio Elizondo, a United States citizen from Texas who has close relationship to this situation reflects on Groody’s book and book of his own authorship<sup>37</sup> saying,

“Those who have darker skin because of their indigenous roots are exploited, degraded, and ridiculed for their culture and treated as inferior human beings. Then, because of devastating poverty, they have to leave their home country where they are already considered inferior and treated harshly, and come to a country that values them only for cheap labor.”<sup>38</sup>

People are forced into immigration, not from a desire to become rich and take advantage of American citizens, but through systemic poverty and oppression. We are talking about oppressed and subjugated people.

Most of these immigrants do not come for their own individual benefit, they come for their families. Many of them come alone with the sole purpose of working to make as much

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<sup>34</sup> Daniel G. Groody, *Border if Life, Valley of Death: An Immigrant Journey of Heart and Spirit*, (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002) 16

<sup>35</sup> Groody, *Border if Life, Valley of Death*, 16

<sup>36</sup> See the story of Alfanso and Ricardo in Gordon Spykman and others, *Let My People Live: Faith and Struggle in Central America* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988) on page 38-40

<sup>37</sup> Virgilio Elizondo’s books on this subject include *Galilean Journey* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000) and *The Future Is Mestizo* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2000)

<sup>38</sup> Daniel G. Groody, *Option for the Poor*, 162

money, as fast as they can, in order to send it back to their families and eventually return to Mexico. One immigrant names Juan reported, “The most painful thing is leaving family behind, especially the children, but we do it in the hopes that someday we will have something in Mexico.”<sup>39</sup> The job profile of these immigrants includes mostly unskilled jobs such as construction work, farm work, meat processing, house keeping, grounds maintenance, and food service.<sup>40</sup> Because of these factors and because Males are culturally more qualified for these unskilled positions, the majority of immigrants are males rather than females.<sup>41</sup> What might be surprising is that most immigrants do not work at substandard wage income. The average income for an immigrant ranges anywhere from \$8-12 an hour depending on location, this is significantly higher than the minimum wage in the U.S.<sup>42</sup>

According to Groody there are three ways to cross the border into the U.S. from Mexico: through the fence along the border, across the canals along the border or through the vast desert that surrounds the region.<sup>43</sup> The immigration trek can be very dangerous. The Border Patrol only guards the frequently traveled regions of the border which pushes immigrants further away into the most dangerous regions. Many immigrants are unsuccessful in their journey and their lives are taken by the great heat of the desert. Immigrants understand the dangers of the journey and they choose to take it anyway, which is a clue to just how bleak and hopeless their situation in Mexico must be.

Why are so many people migrating from Mexico to the United States? The best answer to that question, remembering that there are exceptions to every rule, is dehumanization. Poverty, in

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<sup>39</sup>Groody *Border of Life*, 17.

<sup>40</sup>Charles M. North and Bob Smietana, *Good Intentions: Nine Hot-Button Issues Viewed Through the Eyes of Faith*, (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2008.) 154.

<sup>41</sup>North and Smietana, *Good Intentions*, 154-155.

<sup>42</sup>ibid. 155.

<sup>43</sup>Groody, *Border of Life*, 19.

itself, is dehumanization. When people are denied that which is basic and fair for their survival, they are reduced to death, not by God but by peoples' systems which created such poverty.<sup>44</sup>

Poverty is an experience of death. Gutierrez states that “poverty, in all its complexity and multidimensionality, is the negation of God’s will-to-life, it is a situation that wounds, in many regards, the very heart of the good news of Jesus.”<sup>45</sup> In order to escape such dehumanization and the dehumanization of their families, immigrants are left with no reasonable choice but to illegally relocate north, to the U.S.

#### *How Are Immigrants Treated by the United States?*

Immigrants are not only dehumanized by poverty in their own country and the separation of their families. They are dehumanized by American industry, government, and citizens. Industries need them for their business to flourish but give them unacceptable working conditions and lower wages than any citizen would demand. For U.S. industry, immigrants are an easy target. Since their goal is to make as much income for their family as possible and not to gain social status in a society with which they do not identify, immigrant workers will take jobs that Americans do not want—jobs which, to Americans, represent low social status. In this situation, many of the immigrants are mistreated by the industry and taken advantage of through below standard working conditions and low wages. In all this, there is no job security for them, nothing to protect them from, at any time, being trusted back into the bleak job market. They are valued only for their work, their humanity is rendered meaningless.

Since the events of September 11, 2001, the U.S. government has become so cautious toward the threat of terrorism that the wrong people have become victims. Policy treats Mexican

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<sup>44</sup>“Poverty is the result of the way society has been organized... Thus poverty results from human decisions that create social structures and give birth to racial, cultural, and gender prejudices that have accumulated throughout history.” Groody, *Option for the Poor*, 25

<sup>45</sup>ibid, 28

immigrants as terror threats rather than refugees from poverty. Instead of offering asylum, the Government is building a wall. “The Bush administration says it’ll bypass dozens of laws to finish construction of a fence along the Mexican border.”<sup>46</sup> This wall is meant to keep people out of the United States and allow the poor in Mexico to remain someone else’s problem.

Citizens themselves, in agreement with the propaganda of their government, have begun to mistreat immigrants, once again, treating them as unwanted. According to Justin Akers Chacon, a professor of U.S. history and Chicano studies in San Diego, California; “immigrant scapegoating has accumulated in the margins, fueling the rise of hate groups setting their sights on Latinos, regardless of citizenship status” and thus, “hate crimes are on the rise.”<sup>47</sup> So going from dehumanization through poverty, Mexican immigrants enter dehumanization through racism.

### *American Perception*

Many American citizens are afraid of immigrants, seeing them as a threat to their own security as well as their job security. The American perception of Mexican immigrants is a perception that breeds fear. Often, Mexican immigrants are perceived to be terrorists or immoral criminals. Some Americans believe that they are here to steal jobs from more “deserving” American citizens. Through a lens of these misconceptions Americans view Mexican immigrants in a way which can only be described as racism.

Americans often see Mexican immigrants simply as lawbreakers—they are here illegally and should be deported. What Americans forget is that just because something is legal does not mean it is just, and the reverse is true as well. Many of the key events in U.S. history are marked

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<sup>46</sup>Ted Robins, April 2, 2008, *Border Wall Ploughs Through Laws*, NPR, On-Line, available from <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=89307920>: accessed April 14, 2008

<sup>47</sup>Justin Akers Chacon, March 27, 2008, *What’s Fueling Increase in Violence Against Latinos?* Ventura County Star, On-Line, available from <http://www.venturacountystar.com/news/2008/mar/27/whats-fueling-increase-in-violence-against/>, accessed April 14, 2008.

by lawbreaking.<sup>48</sup> Throughout American history, in order to change unjust laws people broke them. Take, for example, the so-called Boston Tea Party. According to Charles M. North and Bob Smietana “The Boston Tea Party drew strong reactions from British crown and generated sympathy on both sides of the Atlantic for American self-rule. It stands as a watershed event in the founding of the United States”<sup>49</sup> and there was nothing legal about it. Due to unjust import taxation, Americans broke the law and eventually changed things. Also take, for example, the famous story of Rosa Parks, who stood against unjust policy and sat where she, as a black woman, was not allowed to sit. This event now stands as a key event in the American Civil Rights Movement. By these examples, illegal immigrants might be seen not as dangerous lawbreaker but even as patriotic. They, though they are breaking laws, should not be perceived as immoral or dangerous.<sup>50</sup> Immigrants are no more likely to commit crimes than native born citizens.<sup>51</sup> But the American perception is still before the backdrop of fear.

Are Mexican immigrants stealing jobs from more “deserving” American families? “Basic supply-and-demand says that adding more workers to a market will lead to lower wages for all workers in that market.”<sup>52</sup> But what if demand for workers rises along with the growing “supply”—Mexican immigrants? Due to growing need for workers because of decrease in fertility in the U.S. “When employers want to hire more workers, there aren’t enough native-born Americans to choose from. Immigrants come to the United States because American employers need them.”<sup>53</sup> Thus, because the supply is rising at the same time as the demand, the effect citizen workers is very small. The jobs that Mexican immigrants are taking are jobs that wouldn’t

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<sup>48</sup>North and Smietana *Good Intentions*, 156-158

<sup>49</sup>ibid, 157

<sup>50</sup>ibid, 158

<sup>51</sup>ibid, 158

<sup>52</sup>ibid, 161

<sup>53</sup>ibid., 162; also see Massey, Durand, and Malone, *Beyond Smoke and Mirrors*, 15-18.

exist without them. This cannot be called stealing; therefore the American perception is, once again, a false one.

### **Part III. The Church's Response to Mexican-United States Immigration**

Now we must ask the question—how would a church which is both an alternative society and *Koinonia* respond to the issue of Mexican-U.S. immigration? What are the proper responses? Are there contemporary examples of healthy ecclesiological responses from American Christian churches today? We, the church in the U.S., first must seek to change the policy wherever it has become oppressive. Second, we must begin to treat Mexican immigrants as people, created in the Image of God. Third, we must seek to aid the Mexican economy in order to ease the pressure to migrate to the North without creating dependence. And finally, we must tell the stories of oppressed Mexican immigrants and raise awareness of this issue among well-meaning American Christians.

#### *Changing the Policy*

The issue of immigration is complex. There are some cases where deportation is necessary. But very often it is unjust. As an alternative society over against the dominant society, the church in the United States cannot stand in opposition to justice by simply following their government on an oppressive path. What is necessary, in those situations of unjust deportation, when families are split apart and there is simply nowhere else for the immigrant to go, is a stand against the law of the land. We must follow in the tradition of refusal, refusing to give in to unjust policy, even at the risk of legal punishment with the hope of someday changing the law.<sup>54</sup> The dilemma among so many Christians in America is that they want to respect their

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<sup>54</sup>Historical examples of this tradition include The Civil Rights Movement, the Boston Tea Party, and the Woodworth Sit-in. These are all examples of people seeking to change unjust policy by essentially breaking the law.

government. But unfortunately, this respect sometimes becomes a sort of new idolatry where we forget about our neighbor in the name of patriotism—holding the wellbeing of our political system over the wellbeing of “the least of these.” Yes, we must respect our government, but only to the point of injustice. When the political or economic system of which we are a part meets the point of injustice, the church stands against it. This is our responsibility as an alternative society.

As *koinonia* we remember that the church has no borders, so we welcome the foreigner into the church and into the community. Whereas to the United States a Mexican immigrant is unwanted, to the church they are family. So we seek solidarity with them in the Eucharist, remembering that Eucharist transcends the cup and the bread and permeates into real life—everyday life. We remember that Jesus ate and lived amongst unwanted people of society.<sup>55</sup> So we invite the unwanted, forgetting that they are an “illegal” immigrant, remembering that they are beloved by God. Through the Eucharist, we practice the tensions of being resistive and welcoming (alternative society and *koinonia*). Eucharist “resists isolation [the kind of isolation that comes through unjust deportation] because it creates *koinonia* among those who gather around the table and is a genuine encounter with the resurrected Christ.”<sup>56</sup> We remember that in the Eucharistic meals of the early church there were “women, slaves and baptized pagans”<sup>57</sup>—all unwanted people. With this Eucharistic imagination, we stand and fight for our unwanted brother or sister. In the early church, Eucharist was in many ways a stand against the Roman social order.<sup>58</sup> So now, our Eucharist is a stand against the dominant political order and an anticipation of the end of oppression. We anticipate a world without borders—“a community of nations.”<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>55</sup>See Luke 15:1-3

<sup>56</sup>Bieler and Schottroff, *Eucharist*, 144

<sup>57</sup>Groody, *Option for the Poor*, 247.

<sup>58</sup>Since, for example, there were slaves and slave owners dining side by side in one accord. The Book of Ephesians alludes to this fact. Paul addresses slaves and slave-owners in the same letter, which shows us that slaves and slave owners worshiped in the same Eucharistic community.

<sup>59</sup>Bieler and Schottroff, *Eucharist*, 67

We remember the death and resurrection of Jesus in our action as the church. Jesus' death—his becoming unwanted—and resurrection symbolize God's profound "yes" to all unwanted people. God on the cross is a profound declaration that crucified people—unwanted, dehumanized people—are not cursed. To God, the unwanted immigrant worker is blessed and beloved. As Andrea Bieler and Luise Schottroff eloquently put it:

It is the very proclamation of the death of Jesus in the common meal that announces the end of violence that kills and oppresses human beings. The simple fact that people, through their common meal, bring a crucified man into their midst, already mean at that time the naming of that violence as injustice and anticipating its end. The Proclamation of that death happens in the action of the meal with its interpretive words relating it to Jesus' death.<sup>60</sup>

In the Eucharist we remember the immigrant who hung on the cross, we see the immigrant and the U.S. citizen as equals and we anticipate the end of all oppression. We boldly declare the death and resurrection of Jesus to the dominant society.

In solidarity with immigrants, we begin to change the way we talk, the way we pray, and the way we vote. No longer is our focus on bettering our own individual situations and the situation of the U.S. economy. Our focus is now on our neighbor, so we begin to tell the stories, pray for the wellbeing of the immigrant, and vote towards justice for immigrant families.

An example of a movement in the direction of *koinonia* and alternative society is the New Sanctuary Movement. The New Sanctuary Movement has stemmed from the Sanctuary Movement of the 1980's in which churches offered sanctuary to refugees of civil war in Guatemala and El Salvador.<sup>61</sup> The Government would not allow political sanctuary because the U.S. government was allied with these governments.<sup>62</sup> The New Sanctuary Movement has responded to this situation by offering sanctuary to immigrants "who are facing the violation of

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<sup>60</sup>ibid, 58

<sup>61</sup>See James P. Carroll, *House of War*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006) 397-404

<sup>62</sup>The New Sanctuary Movement, "Building on a Powerful Tradition," available from <http://www.newsanctuarymovement.org/build-tradition.htm>, accessed March 16, 2008.

their human rights in the form of hatred, workplace discrimination and unjust deportation.”<sup>63</sup> This is how the church has responded to Yolanda and her family.<sup>64</sup> After Yolanda was faced with the choice of separating her family or keeping them together, she sought help from her church—Emmanuel Presbyterian in Los Angeles, California—which then partnered with the New Sanctuary Movement and offered sanctuary inside the church for Yolanda and her family, where she will stay until the law is changed or I.C.E comes in and forces her out. Because of separation of church and state, the sort of action that the New Sanctuary Movement is taking is illegal and nothing but the possibility of bad press is keeping I.C.E. from busting down the church doors and deporting Yolanda and all the others in sanctuary at other churches. In many other countries which do not have a policy of separation of church and state there are laws which protect churches from having their doors busted in. Offering sanctuary to refugees is legal in these countries. Because of separation of church and state, in the U.S. there is nothing to keep I.C.E from coming in and arresting people from churches.<sup>65</sup> Offering sanctuary is a correct response from the church to this issue but sanctuary is not the goal. Sanctuary is a means to an end. The system must be changed in order for these people to experience justice. Sanctuary is, in itself, a form of poverty and dehumanization—being forced to live in hiding from a governmental system which does not want you. These immigrant families deserve the dignity of walking outside without imminent threats of arrest and deportation.

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<sup>63</sup>ibid, accessed May 5, 2008.

<sup>64</sup>See story from introduction.

<sup>65</sup>Diana Mendoza, New Sanctuary Movement LA Organizer, Interview by author: Los Angeles. Unpublished, Emmanuel Presbyterian Church, Los Angeles, March 14, 2008

Now the New Sanctuary Movement is working to change the policy and change immigration laws to allow people like Yolanda to stay in the United States where they will have the best chance a life.<sup>66</sup> Their pledge includes these statements:

We stand together in our faith that everyone, regardless of national origin, has basic common rights, including but not limited to: 1) livelihood; 2) family unity; and 3) physical and emotional safety. We witness the violation of these rights under current immigration policy, particularly in the separation of children from their parents due to unjust deportations, and in the exploitation of immigrant workers. We are deeply grieved by the violence done to families through immigration raids. We cannot in good conscience ignore such suffering and injustice.<sup>67</sup>

The New Sanctuary Movement is a good example of a church response which remembers the church's identity as alternative society and *koinonia*. They come along side, in solidarity and *koinonia* with immigrant families, remembering that the church has no borders, and they come along side them to change the policy. They are an alternative to the society which seeks to arrest and deport.

### *Seeing Immigrants as People*

It can be easy, when you have grown up in the United States, to keep a limited perspective and see immigrants as outlaws. As we talked about above, there is a perception among U.S. citizens that Mexican immigrants are dangerous criminals and not people created in the image of God. There is a fear that keeps us from embracing immigrants as neighbors and our natural reaction is to seek protection from them which leads us to want immigrants to be arrested and deported. This perception has not stayed outside the church in the U.S., in fact, it has permeated throughout U.S. churches subtly but surely as it has in the general American public.

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<sup>66</sup>The New Sanctuary Movement, "An Invitation to Join the New Sanctuary Movement," available from <http://www.newsanctuarymovement.org/invitation.htm>, accessed May 4, 2008

<sup>67</sup>The New Sanctuary Movement, "New Sanctuary Movement Pledge," available from <http://www.newsanctuarymovement.org/pledge.htm>, accessed May 5, 2008

This fear primarily exists in high-income churches. Immigration is something which upper-class U.S. citizens generally just cannot understand.

As an alternative society, the church in the U.S. must seek to break away from this perception. The best way to break the perception and begin to see immigrants a people is through *koinonia*—actually entering into fellowship with those whom we fear. We need to find space for upper-class Americans to fellowship with the Mexican immigrants. Once again, the New Sanctuary Movement has gotten a small start on creating this sort of space. They often invite people from all sorts of different backgrounds and political opinions to come and visit the families in sanctuary. But this is just a small start. The church must discover its' imagination and learn to dream. Is it as simple as visiting immigrant families? Should we invite them into *our* churches? Should we visit *their* churches? Whatever the conclusion, the church must continue dreaming of ways we can experience true solidarity that transcends social status, economic status, and national origin. We must break the trend of classification and reaffirm the image of God in the world which includes ever human being.

#### *Aiding the Mexican Economy*

The major factor in immigration is poor economy in Mexico forcing struggling families to seek a better life in the U.S. There are many churches, especially Southern California churches, which often take trips to Mexico in order to bring food, clothes, or to build a home for a needy family. As good as the intensions may be, this action is like spraying a single hose into a forest fire. We must not stop at asking what people need; we must ask why they need it. As we see the need in Mexico we must conclude that it exists because of deep seeded economic issues. We should aim to help Mexico, as an economy, “assume its’ rightful place as an equal partner in

the global system.”<sup>68</sup> Therefore, the church in the U.S. cannot stop at bringing one-time aide to individual families. We must go farther and actually aide the whole economy, however possible.

The economy will not get better in any real way if all we do is bring goods and houses. Even if we were to provide for every family south of the border, a house, enough food, and enough clothing they would still be dependant upon American help. We must instead seek to help them help each other and become interdependent and eventually independent. There are U.S. organizations which seek to do just that. By creating jobs and offering opportunities for Mexican citizens to help one another, these organizations do not go to Mexico once a year and then leave, rather, they partner with the community to better the whole economy. Mexican citizens’ helping one another is helpful in providing other solutions to economic poverty other than migration to the U.S. One such organization is Corazon.

Corazon was started by three Orange County, California residents who sought to “help the poor in several villages surrounding Tijuana. They provided food, clothing, basic supplies and spiritual help.”<sup>69</sup> Since then their ministry has grown from helping with immediate needs to individual families toward the broader goal of bettering the economy. By partnering with churches from Southern California, they have built over 950 homes for families.<sup>70</sup> Corazon provides projects for families to participate in toward helping their neighbors. The Process is as follows:

The first step is a family’s desire to improve their way of life. By working on neighborhood projects, *familia* participants can earn hours that they can exchange for many of their basic needs, such as food, clothing, tools, and building materials. More importantly, they become eligible for scholarships for their children and job training for themselves. In the process, they get to know their

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<sup>68</sup>Massey, Durand, and Malone, *Beyond Smoke and Mirrors*, 6

<sup>69</sup>Corazon, “Simple Beginnings,” available from <http://corazon.org/HTMLPages/AboutUs.asp>, accessed May 4, 2008

<sup>70</sup>Corazon, “Corazon Fact Sheet,” available from <http://corazon.org/images/Factsheet.pdf>, accessed May 5, 2008.

neighbors as they work side by side to better the community they seek to raise their children in. The result is a stronger family living in a better community with hope for a brighter future.<sup>71</sup>

Corazon is a good example of the church as *koinonia*. Rather than stepping in once, giving a handout, and then leaving; Corazon is a constant part of the lives of Mexican citizens. They partner with them and the organization is alive amongst them. Though this organization does not provide solutions for Mexicans who have chosen to migrate into the U.S. as the church should and as the New Sanctuary Movement has, they are trying to help the economy in Mexico and offer another way other than migration.

### *Telling Stories*

There is a huge disconnect between immigrants and American citizens and an ignorance among American citizens about the lives of immigrants. If Americans had real relationship with Mexican immigrants, they would be compassionate. The statistics would turn to faces and the policies would turn toward hospitality. To break the common perceptions amongst Americans the church's greatest responsibility, short of forcing Americans to dine with immigrants, is to tell their stories. This is how Yolanda and her friends at Emmanuel Presbyterian have begun to fight against the oppression of dehumanization. To anyone who will visit and listen, Yolanda will tell her story. Anyone who has met her or is close to her will tell her story. And through hearing the stories of broken families, unacceptable working conditions, big business exploitation, and unjust deportation, Americans will begin to see faces instead of numbers and people rather than threats. The church that is an alternative society must tell stories to counter the propaganda of the dominant society's tendency to oppress and deport. The church as *koinonia* must speak loudly as the voice of our brothers and sisters who are silenced by oppression.

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<sup>71</sup>ibid.

## Conclusion

The church is an alternative society and the church is *koinonia*. As such we speak out against injustice and join in solidarity with the subjugated. Due to dehumanizing factors in Mexico, Mexican citizens are forced into a different dehumanization in a country that doesn't want them. In the ears of the church echo the words of Leviticus 19:34: "The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the LORD your God." We remember that we were once aliens and so we enter into solidarity with people whom the dominant society would insist are simply "illegal." So we stand up along side them and seek the interests of our brothers and sisters rather than the interests of a political system. We seek to change the policy which participates in or instigates oppression on either side of the border and we tell the stories of our neighbors' struggles. The reminder, "You were Aliens....," coming from the voice of God, draws us together. The profound "We" of the church includes citizens of the whole world, American and Mexican alike. There are none unwanted. As the church, we remember Yolanda's face in all our dealings with the immigration issue; we see her smile before the backdrop of American economics and politics.

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