DEPORTING OUR BLESSINGS:
ACCOMPANIMENT AND SOLIDARITY IN A TIME OF FEAR

By Jean Stokan, Institute Justice Team
A call came into the Institute Office in late May from an immigrant group in Washington, D.C., as they were preparing a caravan drive to Texas to protest passage of one of the nation’s most severe anti-immigrant state laws.

Rather than the kind of “Nuns on the Bus” call we were used to getting, this one was because undocumented mothers in the caravan were feeling scared and vulnerable, and asked if “nuns could get on their bus.” We were not able to find anyone in the short 36 hours before their departure, but it became clear that Mercy can play many vital roles in protecting people who are at risk and joining social movements as they take courageous risks for justice.

As called for in the Chapter 2017 Recommitment: Called to New Consciousness, Mercy is being challenged to intensify our work for a just and inclusive world. In this moment of history, we are witnessing exponentially greater levels of violence directed against peoples of color, including migrants, immigrants and refugees, from hate speech to a North American version of “disappearing people”—the undocumented.

In the United States, the aggressiveness with which the current administration is going after immigrants and refugees is being compared to two other frightening moments in history: the rounding up of Japanese-Americans into internment camps in the 1940s, and the decision to not permit docking rights to a German ship, M.S. St. Louis, carrying 900 Jewish refugees who were fleeing Hitler’s Germany in 1939.

The administration’s response to the current migration crisis includes: raids and mass deportations of undocumented persons; a dramatic reduction in the number of political asylum seekers and refugees permitted to enter the country; infrastructure to further build a “gated empire;” and the pursuit of a new military-led foreign policy toward Central America reminiscent of the 1980s. There is near zero recognition that decades of flawed U.S. economic, political and military policies have contributed to producing immigrants and refugees by the millions.

Our sisters and associates of the Global South have much to teach those of us in the United States about living through violence, sustaining resistance movements and discerning the harsh realities not often covered in the media. And while the “disappearances” of the undocumented happening now in the United States are not by death squads, but supposedly “legal,” the challenges we are facing are formidable.

Stories from the Front Line
Mercy individuals and institutions have been rising up to boldly defend immigrants and refugees, including actions by our educational institutions, healthcare facilities and social service ministries. While inspiring and moving, it is also heartbreakingly to hear stories from those who work directly with immigrants:
- “Undocumented people are afraid to come out of their homes or take public transportation. Volunteers offered to drive them to medical appointments, but now the volunteers are afraid they’ll be charged with ‘harboring criminals.’”
- “All are in a panic. People will not call the sheriff when help is needed. DACA [Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals] youth are worried for parents. Fewer are going to college.”
- “In our small town, small businesses are really hurting as people are afraid to be on the streets.”
- “Our ministry has been trained to go into lockdown if Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) comes to the door.”
- “Our staff are at risk, especially those who open our doors. One has already been deported.”
- “We notice many more people picked up who have been here 20 to 40 years. Some have homes, businesses, U.S citizen children and grandchildren. They had a brush with the law maybe 15 or 20 years ago. Now they have been put in deportation proceedings because of it.”

Some of our Mercy community who provide pastoral and legal assistance in detention centers report that new centers are being opened along the border, as well as in out-of-the way places across the United States. Others are offering “Know Your Rights” workshops, including helping those who are undocumented fill out forms in case they are picked up by ICE to assign who will care for their children. It is a sad sign of the times that children walking home from school each day have to wonder if their parents will still be there.

Calls to Solidarity with Immigrants
Given this new reality, and reflecting on a spirituality of accompaniment that can ground us with the strength and courage to respond to the new challenges, below are some of the calls to solidarity with immigrants that we have been hearing:

Accompanying immigrants to ICE appointments.
Many undocumented persons have to present themselves for regular check-ins with ICE officials. Such appointments
can take hours. If you have time to volunteer, or can encourage others in retirement to help, there is a great need to simply accompany people. It provides comfort to people feeling vulnerable and serves to let the officials know the outside world is watching. While some people have been detained during those check-ins and, without prior notice, processed for deportation, the presence of the faith community also has served to deter such action. The first step, if you can volunteer, is to contact a local immigrant-led organization and offer your assistance.

Sanctuary everywhere.
Beyond four walls to physically house people who are undocumented, there are a variety of ways that sanctuary is being pursued to keep people safe and keep families together. Mercy, and people all over, are organizing local coalitions to provide urgent support to people who are undocumented: hosting legal clinics and “Know Your Rights” workshops; creating rapid response networks in case of raids; and discerning offering physical sanctuary. There are risks in offering space for sanctuary, but excellent resources are available for groups feeling called to take greater levels of risk. There also is great need for support congregations who do not offer space, but help by providing meals, transportation, etc. See resources at: www.sanctuarynotdeportation.org.

Deeper Learning about the Root Causes of Migration.
Chapter 2017 Recommitment calls for a “new consciousness” and for applying the lens of nonviolence to the Critical Concerns. This direction is an opportunity to delve even deeper into the root causes of migration in order to most effectively focus action in response. If interested in joining a U.S.-Mexico border or other immersion delegation, contact the Institute Justice Team (jstokan@sistersofmercy.org). Reading resources are posted on the Sisters of Mercy website, including:

- Understanding Immigration & Refugees within a Historical Context: Connecting our Critical Concerns. This document was prepared by Mercy’s Immigrant Advocacy Group (IAG) as background material for Chapter delegates. It carefully examines the theologies of entitlement and the history of the Church in colonization, as well as offers analysis on the interconnectedness of the Critical Concerns—available at bit.ly/connectingCC.
- Other resources can be found at www.sistersofmercy.org/immigration-resources.

Advocacy.
While the Trump Administration has called for building broader wall infrastructure at the U.S.-Mexico border, as well as massive detention and deportation of undocumented persons, Congress controls the purse to fund this plan. It is an important time in the United States to advocate directly with your members of Congress and/or attend town halls and public events where they will be speaking. It’s also important to write letters-to-the-editor in local newspapers to say no to funding for the detention and deportation apparatus. If you are not already signed up for Mercy Institute’s Advocacy Action email list, please do so here (bit.ly/MercyAdvocacyAction) and you will be notified when action is needed.

Direct support.
Immigration lawyers and those trained in political asylum law are desperately needed. Funds also are needed for legal help, as well as for the host of needs of women and children in detention, transportation costs, etc.—particularly in areas where Mercy is ministering with undocumented immigrants and refugees. If you want to help by raising funds, please contact Sister Diane Clyne of the Mercy IAG at dclynersm@gmail.com. Also, if you know of immigrants and refugees, including those legally in the United States, who may need assistance or resources, there is a wealth of information available through the USCCB’s site, Justice for Immigrants: bit.ly/USCCBImmigrantresources.
If Not Us, Who? If Not Now, When?

This article’s title, “Deporting Our Blessings,” came from a recent vigil in front of the White House. It seemed to capture not just who we are losing because of the current policy of mass deportation, but also what we are losing and desperately need: the values of another culture that enrich our own. It’s the faith of immigrant and refugee communities that is revitalizing many of our parishes; their values of community, family bonds and hard work are sadly diminishing in the United States. For the sake of our country’s soul, as well as for the dignity of every migrant, immigrant and refugee, we cannot afford to deport any more of our blessings.

Reflecting on “what is Mercy to do” in this period of so much fear among our immigrant and refugee sisters and brothers, we may be drawn to new ways of living out solidarity, perhaps inviting more people to get involved, organizing accompaniment volunteers at a retirement center, participating in public vigils and holding a “Mercy” sign to demonstrate support, or taking greater risks in terms of discerning civil disobedience or sanctuary options. Even if we are already involved and feel we cannot do one more thing, the challenge may not be to do more, but to do that which takes more courage. If not us, who? If not now, when?

If Not Us, Who? If Not Now, When?

If Not Us, Who? If Not Now, When?

If Not Us, Who? If Not Now, When?

Jean Stokan is on the Institute Justice Team, coordinating work on immigration and nonviolence. She has worked on human rights in Latin America, immigration reform and federal budget priorities to ensure support for vulnerable communities. You can contact her at jstokan@sistersofmercy.org.

CARING FOR IMMIGRANTS:
OUR CALL AS MERCY

BY SISTER ROSEMARY WELSH

I HAVE BEEN A SISTER OF MERCY FOR 50 YEARS.

In 1981, I ministered in Guatemala with sisters from Honduras and the United States and in Chipas, Mexico, with a sister from Argentina. I saw firsthand the situation—how U.S. policies had for years wreaked havoc in Latin American countries, creating violence and fear and compelling so many immigrants to cross the border in hopes of a better life. They did not, do not, want to leave their homes, their kids. They are so afraid, and they see no hope where they are.

One woman with whom I worked was just recently deported. She came from Mexico. Her mother had abandoned her as a teenager, and to feed herself she became a prostitute for a drug cartel. She did not know what they were. She had three children, and the cartel wanted her oldest daughter, who was barely 13, to work for them, too. “I couldn’t put my daughter through this,” she said. She sought refuge in the United States, but was deported along with her kids—the immigration court deemed her too risky because of her association with the cartels. How will she be safe, back in the country from which she ran away?

For those who are not deported, there is constant fear. We find at our clinic that sometimes people who need medical assistance are afraid to drive to the Mercy Clinic. A bill, SB4, went into effect on September 1, 2017, in Texas that asks all law enforcement to check for papers. People feel like captives in their homes. Of course, at our clinic we do not ask for any documentation. We also operate mobile clinics to bring our health services to people in outlying regions.

Fear of deportation also impacts victims of domestic violence. In 1998 Mercy opened CASA de Misericordia, a domestic violence shelter. Many women here are too afraid to call the police, because they do not have proper documentation, and at times they have no other choice but to remain in an unsafe situation.

We try to educate people to know their rights, understand new laws and know where to go for help. We also organize volunteers to visit the detention centers and if they are able, to offer translation assistance for the pro bono lawyers with whom we’ve partnered to provide aid to those in detention. This benefits all. The volunteers—their lives are transformed by the stories they hear. The staff at the center—they tend to shape up when they know we will be there consistently. And for the women in detention—no matter what may happen, they know that someone cares for them and that good people in the United States are trying to help them.

We have to take every opportunity we can when it comes to helping our immigrant brothers and sisters. Hearts can be changed by this work of Mercy.

Sister Rosemary Welsh ministers in Laredo, Texas, as executive director of CASA de Misericordia, a shelter for victims of domestic violence, and as director of outreach and nurse at Mercy Ministries of Laredo.

Jean Stokan is on the Institute Justice Team, coordinating work on immigration and nonviolence. She has worked on human rights in Latin America, immigration reform and federal budget priorities to ensure support for vulnerable communities. You can contact her at jstokan@sistersofmercy.org.