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Mission **MOSAIC**



**PRESBYTERIAN
DISASTER
ASSISTANCE**

OUT OF CHAOS, **HOPE**

Year in Review **2019**



MICHELLE MUÑIZ.



Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
Presbyterian Mission

Mosaic Musings: a word from the director of Presbyterian Disaster Assistance



Dear Friends of Presbyterian Disaster Assistance, Welcome to Mission Mosaic, our overview of the ways in which the church worked through Presbyterian Disaster Assistance (PDA) to rebuild communities devastated by disaster, provide spiritual support, advocacy, and accompaniment to communities stricken by violence, and support communities who are providing hope and humanitarian aid to refugees and asylum seekers all around the world, including here in the United States. Last year was a tumultuous one, and PDA is deeply grateful for the ways in which your gifts, your time and your prayers continue to make it possible for us to live into the vision of Matthew 25 — to provide food and drink to those without; shelter communities whose homes have been destroyed by fire, flood and wind; visit children and others imprisoned; and welcome the stranger, especially those at our own borders. Within these pages you will see some ways that PDA's work has grown in 2019. Our International Response program has welcomed two new staff members, whose background and experience is deeply rooted in the areas of the world where they will be leading disaster response efforts; hear a bit of the stories of Mr. Sheku Sillah, who led the Nepal Earthquake and Philippines Haiyan responses, and who is becoming permanent staff for Africa and Asia, based in his home country of Sierra Leone; and the Rev. Edwin González-Castillo, who joined PDA staff from Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria and whose responsibilities expand to incorporate responses in the Caribbean and Latin America. In response to the continuing and deepening crisis of solidarity with people on the move, PDA's mandate to support humanitarian response with refugees has continued to expand and change, as congregations on the border partner with neighbors in Mexico and Latin America to provide accompaniment, support and care to vulnerable families and individuals. The Big Tent gathering in Baltimore last summer hosted a pre-conference gathering of churches and mid councils that are deeply committed to this work; it is a great blessing to see so many churches and communities joining in Choosing Welcome! Finally, PDA's Story Ministry released the award-winning and powerful documentary Flint: The Poisoning of an American City, and as you read this, its release on major streaming platforms has spurred a grass-roots movement of screenings, as congregations and communities listen to Flint's hard yet inspiring story and begin to dig into serious water injustice in their own backyard. This year, all of Story Ministry's fine documentaries will have new study guides for congregational learning and community outreach. Above all, we thank you: for caring about those afflicted by disaster, providing resources to support emergency and long-term response, for showing up in support of refugees and asylum seekers, volunteering to participate in rebuilding efforts and hosting, and for never turning away from the opportunities to learn more deeply about the root causes, continuing structural challenges and powerful stories of those we serve, and in whom, by grace, we see anew the face of God.

Laurie A Kraus



PRESBYTERIAN DISASTER ASSISTANCE

OUT OF CHAOS, HOPE

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When Global Response Requires Global Resources

By Rich Copley

Presbyterian News Service

The meeting was done, and the Rev. Edwin González-Castillo thought he was leaving with his collaborators from Presbyterian Disaster Assistance (PDA).

This was in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria's devastating blow to Puerto Rico, and at the time, González-Castillo was the stated clerk for the Presbytery of San Juan, coordinating with PDA to assist in recovery from the storm. The person they were meeting with pulled González-Castillo aside to speak with him in Spanish.

"He started saying things that he didn't say in the whole meeting that were really important," González-Castillo said. "When I got to the car, I said, 'So ... this is the backstory that you didn't hear, because he didn't want to say it in English.'"

"And it was important for us. It was really good information that explained why other things were happening. But he didn't feel comfortable saying it to people from the mainland, because there's also a sense of shame that, 'If we say this, they might think this other thing.' So, a Latino will understand because he's from here and he knows what is happening."

Insight from that moment and similar encounters has informed a restructuring of PDA's international staffing, in the wake of a key staff member's departure.

"We had the opportunity to change the model completely," said the Rev. Dr. Laurie Kraus, director of Presbyterian Disaster Assistance. "Instead of having the work for international be primarily centered in the U.S., we are trying to make sure that wherever possible, we have people whose experience is in the region that they are supervising."



So, in the new structure, González-Castillo, who joined the PDA staff in early 2018 as a special consultant for Puerto Rico, is now overseeing Latin America and the Caribbean. Sheku Sillah, who has supervised projects for PDA in the Philippines, Nepal and India under contract is joining the staff as the regional project manager for Asia and Africa. And Kraus will continue to oversee work in Europe and the Middle East.

Dayna Oliver is continuing her critical administrative role as PDA's associate for international program administration.

"It's an attempt to recognize that global response requires global resources," Kraus said. "While we're not looking to broadly expand our staff, we do want to have the areas in which we're doing response represented by people who understand those areas.

"What we're trying to do is have colleagues on staff whose location makes them aware and able to be advocates and also to help us to check our privilege and our cultural blind spots so that we

can continue to decolonize our work and localize it as much as possible."

That, to a large extent, has been PDA's approach, with the restructuring primarily at the top. As it has been doing in the past, PDA's primary method of international disaster response has been to identify local partners and help them build their capacity to respond to crises and strengthen their communities.

"One approach I like, working with PDA, is we don't go on the ground, do our things, [impose our beliefs or practices]," said Sillah, who has been involved with humanitarian work since 1999. "Having worked with other organizations ... the approach PDA applies is very effective and sustainable. Why effective and sustainable? We don't just create a culture with our money that, say, we come in to build wells, we come in to give you livelihoods. No.

"No matter how you want to help me, if I'm in need, I think, for sustainability and effectiveness it is better if you consult me, 'What are your



needs?' If I tell you my needs, if you support me with my preference, I think it will be a very effective and sustainable opportunity. I like that approach very much, and that's what we emphasize in all our programs that I've worked on with PDA."

He reflects back on his first project for PDA, aiding recovery from Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines.

Dealing with farmers to get them back to work, the presumption was that they would need farming equipment. But as he worked with the local agriculture community, he found that what they really could use was water buffaloes to help with some of the heavy work. Where they were located, farm machinery would be difficult to maintain, particularly finding spare parts and things of that sort. But a water buffalo could be shared between several families and the community was used to maintaining livestock.

That was also the first place he used Sawyer Water Filters, highly sustainable and effective filters for helping curb waterborne illnesses, which he also addressed in Nepal.

Being involved in international humanitarian work for 20 years has given Sillah plenty of

experience with navigating the complexities of issues like getting visas to work in different countries, identifying reliable partners and navigating local politics.

The difficulties and limitations of visas really makes working with reliable local partners imperative, because often Sillah cannot be in a country indefinitely. In Nepal, building the capacity of two local partner organizations enabled a thriving effort including building capacity for agriculture, clothes making, medical facilities and more.

Oliver commented that on a visit to Nepal with Kraus and Compassion, Peace & Justice director Sara Lisherness, the people that Sillah had been mentoring were very proud to show the work they had been doing on the road to recovery from the devastating 2015 earthquake.

Making those contacts and clearing bureaucratic hurdles is something González-Castillo is starting to learn about as he steps into his new role. And he had to learn quickly, because no sooner had he been named to the Latin American post then Hurricane Dorian dealt a devastating blow to the Bahamas.

Rev. Edwin González-Castillo scrapes paint from a handrail while on a mission trip to Puerto Rico with Louisville's Springdale Presbyterian Church, where he is also the Youth Coordinator.

Sheku Sillah distributes water filters to a school in Nepal.



Sheku Sillah provides a demonstration of the water filters before distribution.



“It was baptism by fire,” González-Castillo said of the hurricane, which hit a month after he had taken on the new role. “I started receiving a lot of calls about the Bahamas, and before the hurricane hit, I already had contact with some people on the ground.”

Based on his own experience going through Maria, he was aware that it was likely phone lines would be down and other communication would be cut off in the immediate aftermath of the storm. So, he knew he needed to establish contacts to reach out to, once the storm was over. And when he visited the islands after the storm to assess the damage, González-Castillo said that people knowing he had been through Maria changed their body language and moved conversations along quickly.

But it’s not easy.

“Of course, the Bahamas is not Puerto Rico, which is part of the U.S.A., and the Bahamas is an independent commonwealth realm, which has made some things difficult and complicated,” González-Castillo said. “But at the same time there’s a lot of similarities between

what happened to them, and they have a big Haitian community that was affected, and it’s going to take both so many years for this situation to improve.”

A lot of González-Castillo’s early work has been making contacts in Latin American countries, getting a sense of the politics and cultural challenges that will need to be navigated when the time comes to respond to disasters in these countries.

While he started work as a pastor, his parents gave him roots in humanitarian work by the ways they lived their lives. His mother left the Dominican Republic for Puerto Rico on a late-night boat, and later helped shelter others who made the same move. His father, he remembers, was the type who would literally give the shirt off his back. He remembers people coming to his father’s store with needs, saying they would pay him back, but González-Castillo remembers that his father never actually wrote down what the people owed. He just wanted to help.

“Those are values that you cannot get from a book,” González-Castillo said. “You have to see people act that way. And I love my parents for

that. They were not rich, they raised five kids in a poor community in San Juan, but whatever the values they had they were more than enough for me.”

Both Sillah and González-Castillo acknowledge that though they are regionally based, they cannot possibly know all about the lives of the people they are walking with. That is why, even though partnerships with people and organizations on the ground are keys to this work, it also involves a lot of travel and weeks, if not months, away from home and family.

But being with people impacted by disaster is vital to getting the long-term help that will have the most impact, that will leave people better prepared for the next time.

González-Castillo recalls meeting a displaced family in a train station, with nowhere, really, to stay, exposed to the cold and the rain and seeing where they tried to make shelter.

“Then you understand why there’s the organization of a church that tried to get clothes for them and tried to get blankets,” González-Castillo said. “It is because they’re sleeping on the streets and they need at least that, for that night. Right? Because the day before, it rained and everything was soaked, and they don’t have anything to wear then the next day.

“So those things you cannot think about it unless you’re there and see it.”

Sillah recalled seeing the results of work in Nepal and said, “I love seeing the lives of people change. So that’s why I have my partners who go to hard-to-reach areas.

“You see people you met with nothing, and now they’re happy, their kids are happy. For me it means a lot of satisfaction ... a lot of satisfaction.”



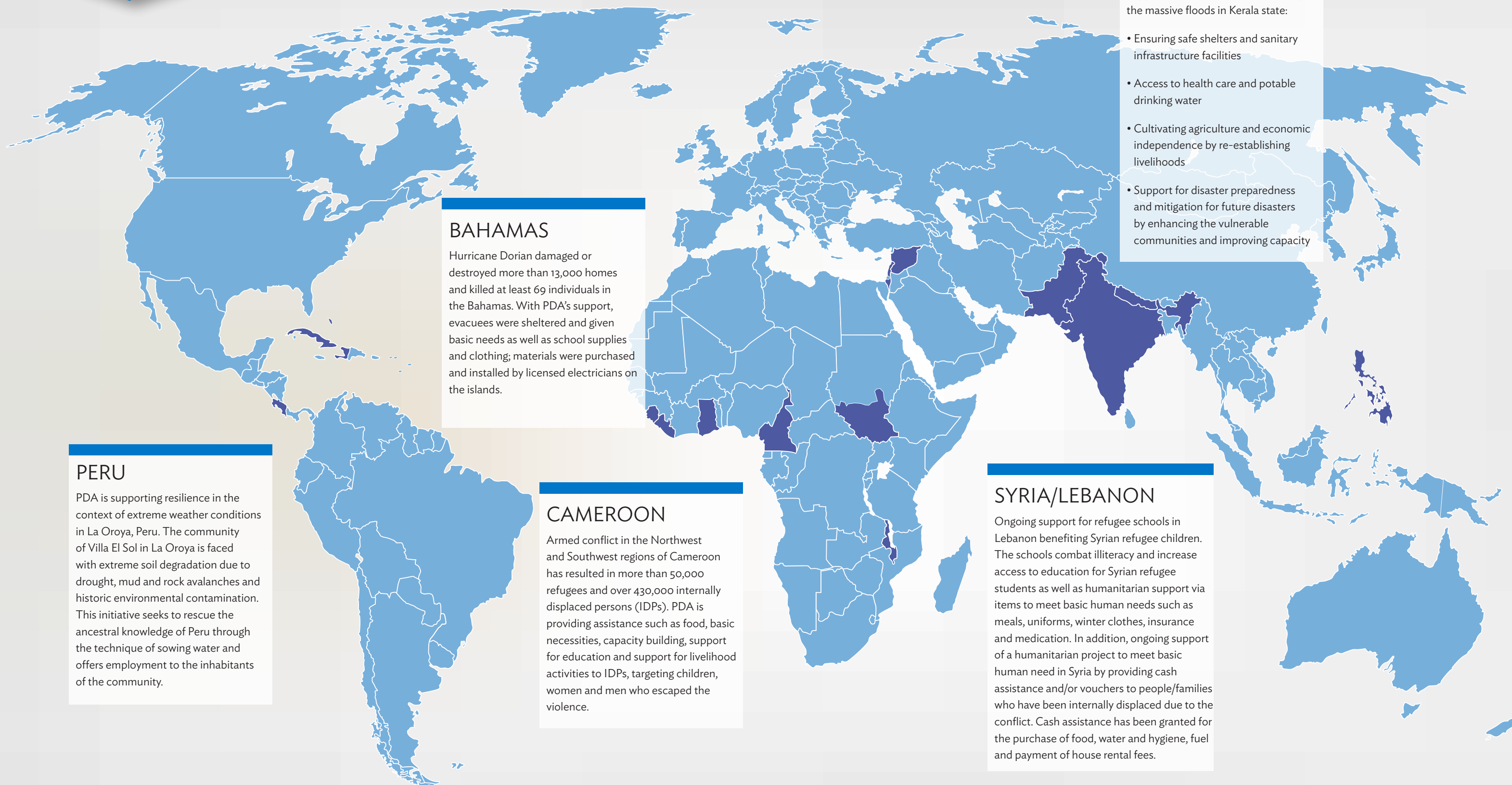
Sheku Sillah assists with goat distribution in Nepal.

DESIGNATE GIFTS
TO A SPECIFIC AREA—
See our website for a
list of active Disaster
Response accounts.
pcusa.org/PDA

Your Gifts At Work Internationally

Total amount granted: **\$1,668,844.60**

In 2019, PDA responded to disasters in 19 countries outside the U.S. Dark blue indicates a country that received assistance.



Story Ministry focuses on voices that need to be heard

Documentaries win awards, receive widespread distribution

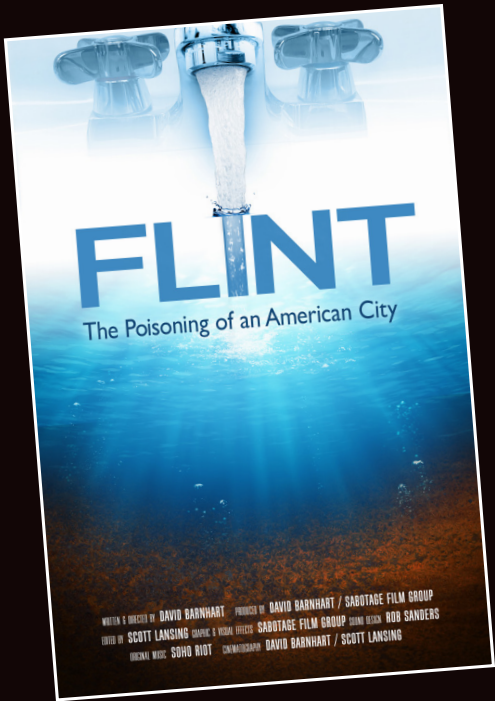
By Rich Copley

FLINT, Michigan – David Barnhart was talking the morning after the world premiere of his new documentary for Presbyterian Disaster Assistance’s Story Ministry, “Flint: The Poisoning of an American City,” in its namesake city.

“It was just amazing to see the community, the turnout, the response, and the city, and the steering committee, and the community, and the partners taking ownership of the film. The film is not ours, not mine,” he said, choking on the last few words, “not the Church’s ...”

After years of working on the documentary about the water crisis that began when toxic levels of lead were allowed to enter the city’s drinking water system, Barnhart has become committed to the city and many of its residents who shared portions of their lives to help the film become a reality.

“All of our work is rooted in relationships and when you sit and listen to people and their stories over time, you become deeply connected with that community. It just builds up in layers and those emotions come out whether you want them to or not,” Barnhart said.



From communities suffering the aftereffects of a powerful tsunami to survivors of gun violence to refugees ensnared in an inhumane immigration system, Barnhart has sat with a lot of people who have endured excruciating trauma to share their stories with Presbyterians and wider audiences in his films. “Communities invite us into these sacred spaces to walk with them and we do this Story work together.”

As a partner and custodian of these stories, Barnhart doesn’t measure his success by traditional cinematic metrics, such as sales and awards. But even by those standards, 2019 was a banner year for Story Ministry.

“Flint,” a full-length documentary, led the charge with its world premiere in Flint and subsequent premieres coast to coast, engaging Flint community



members and people concerned with local water rights issues in conversation. Even before its premiere, “Flint” picked up the Frank Little Award for Self Sacrifice and Social Change at the Covellite International Film Festival in Butte, Montana, and since its world premiere tour, the film was picked up for distribution on Amazon Prime, iTunes, Google Play and OnDemand for cable services such as Comcast, Spectrum and Charter.

Also picking up distribution on Amazon was “Trigger,” Story’s 2014 film about gun violence. And “Locked in a Box,” a 2016 film about immigration detention, was screened at New York City’s Indie & Foreign Film Festival and won the Immigration Advocacy in Documentary Film Award.

“David is really more of a channeler of story than he is a storyteller, because David, more than almost anyone I’ve ever met, listens so deeply, and lets the story speak itself,” said the Rev. Dr. Laurie Kraus, director of Presbyterian Disaster Assistance (PDA). “He honors, so profoundly, the voice of the people whose story

PDA documentary inspired the “Immigration Advocacy in Documentary Film” award for “Locked in a Box: Immigration Detention.” This was the first year giving out this award.



it is, and he doesn’t shape that story or push that story. He lets that story emerge, and then he opens his arms to hold that holy space so that that story can tell itself.

“Because of that, you don’t have to be a church person to get the power of the stories he’s telling or to be impacted by it and to want to use your experience to help you change the inequities that that story has revealed.”

Barnhart came to his current work as a filmmaker through work as an associate with PDA in Mexico and Central America. He began to use his background in filmmaking to create unique reports from the field.

That soon led to short and long-form documentaries that even made their way onto network television. Most of Barnhart’s recent work has been with producer and editor Scott Lansing out of his Sabotage Film Group, based in Norcross, Georgia.

While the films are being screened in mainstream venues, Barnhart maintains that they are in essence educational resources for the Church and for people interested in the issues they address. That is reflected in how “Flint” has rolled out, with screenings accompanied by panels with local officials and activists discussing local water issues.

“You have people that are coming with a purpose,” Barnhart said. “I think that it’s really important to almost challenge the audience before the screening and during or after: ‘You know what, we’re not just coming here to listen. We’re coming here with intention, and what are you called to do? How can you engage? How can you be a part of a movement for change?’”

In recent years, particularly with the advent of platforms such as Amazon Prime Video and Netflix, documentary film has grown as a tool of social justice movements, and Story Ministry films give the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) a voice in that arena.

“It’s important for the Church to be in these spaces,” Barnhart said. “I think it’s important for the Church to be in film festivals, to be in



(L) Scott Lansing and (R) David Barnhart speak with the audience after screening “Flint.”

universities, to be in museums, to be in citywide screenings in Flint. We have to do outreach and be a part of the movements that are part of the issues that are important to people and be able to humanize those issues, engage people and find the way forward together. We can’t just lock ourselves within the four walls of the Church or within our own circles.”

Even as “Flint” has rolled out, Barnhart has been on to the next projects, including wrapping up a series on race called “Trouble the Water: Conversations to Disrupt Racism and Dominance.” This project is the result of the collaboration across two Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) agencies and several offices and initiatives as well as responding to recent General Assembly actions. As our nation struggles with these deep systemic and structural issues daily, the PC(USA) hopes this series can be a resource to bring people together through story, listen to one another, have difficult but honest conversations and collectively work together to disrupt systemic racism.

Barnhart is also taking initial steps toward a project on Puerto Rico in the aftermath of

Hurricane Maria, and he is contemplating returning to the topic of gun violence, which has certainly evolved in the five years since “Trigger” was released.

As always, Barnhart’s approach is to start by connecting with the people at the heart of the issue he is tackling, before the first frames are captured.

“When you walk into that environment, in that space, you realize the sacred ground that you’re on, and you have to go and listen,” Barnhart said. “There’s really no other thing that you should do except accompany people and listen to people.

“When you do that, and do not bring your own agenda into the conversation, and ask the question, ‘What is at the heart of all of this?’ what you find is the humanity. And that is what we hope the films can do: go deeper into the issues and find and lift up the humanity that is there.”

A new volunteer venture

By Eden Roberts, Jim Kirk and Dartha Rivera

Presbyterian Disaster Assistance (PDA) has worked in long-term recovery efforts following disasters for years. This includes scheduling volunteer work teams at recovery host sites who clean, rebuild or repair homes years after a disaster. In the past two years, PDA has scheduled 16,516 volunteers from 468 different churches, universities and organizations to



Volunteers from Monticello Presbyterian Church chainsaw a downed tree after a tornado in Albany, Georgia.

stay at one of our many host sites. This model — aimed at meeting needs identified for the recovery phase — is extremely effective. However, there is an additional area of disaster response we are excited to develop: response hosting. While recovery host sites typically open six to 12 months after a disaster, response host sites could feasibly open within days. After large disasters, Eden Roberts, manager of the PDA National Call Center, takes scores of calls from people asking how they can assist those in distress. “After telling compassionate folks with a desire to help immediately after a big disaster that PDA may open host sites in a few months, it is a pleasure to have response hosting alternatives for those willing and able to serve much earlier,” Roberts says. Jim Kirk, associate for national disaster response, has considered this need for some time. “There is a definite need for organized, vetted volunteers in the immediate aftermath of a disaster, and there are many in the Presbyterian Church

(U.S.A.) who hear the call to respond,” Kirk says. “The response hosting initiative will bring together needs and resources in an organized, faithful fashion and will further enable us to witness to the healing love of Christ in communities impacted by a disaster.” Kirk, along with a committed team of staff and National Response Team (NRT) members, devised a plan for PDA to be part of early response, complementing PDA’s well-established contributions in long-term recovery. The idea of response hosting is not new to PDA; it was previously introduced in a few suitable places. However, specific protocols and basic strategies are now in place for intentional, successful implementation. Twelve members of the NRT have been selected for response hosting deployments. These members commit to being available three to six weeks at a time, have advanced training in all aspects of volunteer hosting, and have training in long-term recovery. They also have knowledge of response work and possess the supportive skills that are vital when working with countless others in a fluid situation. These NRT members will initially oversee the host site, organize the location and manage volunteers, thereby freeing church members and staff to concentrate on critical needs within their family, congregation or community. As with all PDA activity, our involvement with response hosting will occur at the invitation of the presbytery in appropriate disasters: broad areas impacted by a large, regional disaster — most likely hurricanes. In certain circumstances, response host sites may transition into recovery host sites. PDA’s commitment to provide safe and meaningful work remains unchanged. Interested parties may contact the National Call Center by emailing pda.callcenter@pcusa.org, who can then refer volunteers to the response hosting NRT member in the impacted area. You can also view a list of current volunteer opportunities by visiting pcusa.org/pdavolunteersites.



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— ISAIAH 58



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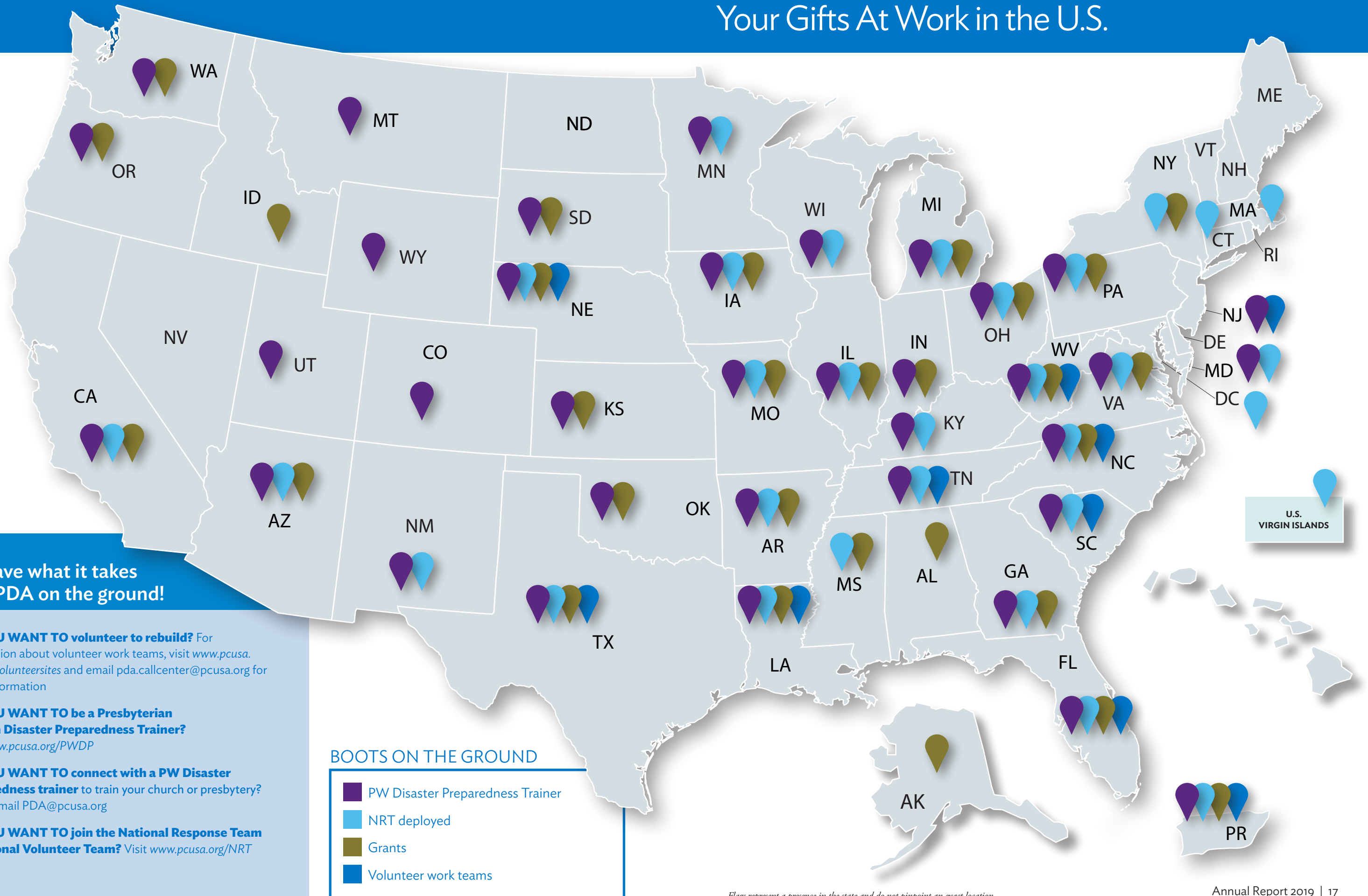
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or **National Volunteer Team?** Visit www.pcusa.org/NRT

Flags represent a presence in the state and do not pinpoint an exact location

Facts & Figures

United States

Total dollars granted: **\$3,559,424.38**



Hurricanes

69 grants, 99 NRT deployed*



Floods

31 grants, 23 NRT deployed



Human-Caused Disaster/Trauma

7 grants, 8 NRT deployed



Tornadoes

10 grants, 5 NRT deployed



Fires

12 grants, 24 NRT deployed



Storms

7 grants



Refugee ministry

15 grants, 45 NRT deployed



Earthquake

2 grants

*The PDA National Response Team consists of about 100 members who represent PDA and the PC(USA) in the field following a disaster. They provide support to presbyteries and synods as they assess the impact of the disaster on both the church and the community, and they assist in connecting presbyteries to recovery resources.

7,354

blue shirt volunteers
gave more than

404,000

hours of volunteer labor,
valued at more than

\$10 million

(according to the Independent Sector)

Foreigners and strangers or members of God's household?

By Susan Krehbiel and Jennifer Lockard

Whatever your opinion of U.S. immigration policies, many people — such as those attempting to enter through our southern border — are living in precarious, life-threatening situations. In response, people of faith continued to provide life-saving services that uplift the human soul and reaffirm individuals' dignity. These transformative personal experiences allowed us to be faithful allies, to advocate for the individuals we met, to speak to those in power on their behalf and to educate others about the need for welcoming policies.

2019 was another year of frequent changes to official U.S. asylum and refugee resettlement policies and procedures. Despite government-mandated deterrents, nothing prevented the ongoing arrival of families and children from around the world seeking asylum at the U.S./Mexico border. Similar to 2018, the majority of newcomers originated in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, all of them fleeing widely recognized humanitarian emergencies caused by

decades of poverty, failed government policies, broken families, lack of protection for women and children, and violence that continues to plague the region.

When considering the changes to U.S. policy, it is crucial to understand where our government's legal obligations and commitments lie. U.S. and international refugee law state that asylum seekers have the legal right to seek protection



A church in Tijuana's courtyard that was used for coffee hour is now a place for asylum seekers to do laundry and to socialize.



from persecution and violence and should not be detained for seeking refuge. Also, it is the government's duty to ensure that there is meaningful access to the asylum process. Nevertheless, as the number of asylum seekers has grown at the southern border, instead of developing proactive mechanisms to ensure an orderly asylum process, the U.S. government has implemented policies to deter people from seeking asylum:

- Ongoing separation of families, including young children from their parents;
- Closure of ports or limiting asylum processing to 12 or 20 per day, referred to as "metering";
- Criminal charges for entry or smuggling their children — forcing them to go to federal court in addition to immigration court;
- Sub-standard detention conditions at border stations;
- Drastic changes to asylum screening and criteria for court referrals;
- A "Remain in Mexico" policy that deports people to Mexico to wait for their asylum case to be heard in immigration court; and
- "Safe third country" agreements with Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala.

An asylum seeker must prove a well-founded fear of persecution based on religion, race, nationality, political opinion or membership in a specific social group. In 2019, the federal government transferred the responsibility for the initial asylum screening at the border, known as "credible fear interviews," from asylum officers to Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) agents and law enforcement, and issued new directives to disallow certain types of asylum claims. Not surprisingly, the rate of rejected credible fear claims has skyrocketed.

Perhaps the most devastating policy change in asylum policy this year, however, has been the implementation of the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP), referred to familiarly as "Remain in Mexico." Adopted in January 2019, this program returns asylum seekers who have been inspected at any U.S. port of entry to Mexico while they await their legal proceedings. With few exceptions, asylum seekers are sent back to situations in Mexico where they are

at risk of extreme violence, exploitation and even death, most often at the hands of cartels. Recent data shows that not only is the number of migrants threatened with and victimized by violence larger than usual, these threats and attacks continue to climb the longer an asylum seeker remains in Mexico. Shelters and churches in the northern Mexico border cities report that attacks against the asylum seekers and disappearances are common. By enforcing the MPP in this manner, the U.S. is failing its commitment to non-refoulement, the international human rights principle that no one should be returned to a place where they will face cruel treatment or severe harm.

Returning to Mexico also means that asylum seekers are largely cut off from the attorneys who can help them apply for and receive asylum. The MPP regularly result in family separations at the discretion of border authorities. These separations most often see the adult returned to Mexico and their children sent to U.S.-based children's shelters. Ongoing family separations lead to widespread trauma for the children, who are forcefully detained for extended periods of time with no knowledge of what has happened to their parents or family members. Once they get to court, children have also been forced to choose between their parents — potentially seeing the rejected parent immediately deported — further adding to their suffering.

Tents inside Fellowship Hall of Iglesia Embajadores de Jesus (Ambassadors of Jesus Church) shelter families.



Asylum seekers must appear at a tent court in Laredo under the “Remain in Mexico” policy.

In September 2019, the U.S. government brokered “safe third country” agreements with Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador. In laymen’s terms, these multilateral agreements force asylum seekers to apply for asylum not in the U.S. but in some of the most dangerous countries in the world. For example, any asylum seeker who passes through Guatemala — other than Guatemalans — may be transferred back to Guatemala to present their asylum claim. Those effectively trapped in Honduras by the safe third country agreements will find themselves in a country where two-thirds of its roughly 9 million people live in poverty and experience widespread gang and gender-based violence. The U.S. State Department’s travel advisory for El Salvador to American citizens suggests that people “reconsider travel [to El Salvador] due to crime ... murder, assault, rape and armed robbery is common.” It is widely accepted by human rights groups that these agreements will create a considerable humanitarian crisis in Central America because not only are none of these countries’ infrastructures strong enough to handle the influx, forcing asylum seekers to remain within reach of their persecutors hints firmly at a death sentence.

Closing off the U.S. to refugees is not limited to how we treat people at our southern border. The number of refugees worldwide has reached the highest level since World War II, approximately 26 million individuals. Yet U.S. refugee admissions continue to decline, putting thousands more in danger as they wait for the U.S. to resettle them. Like those forced to wait in the “no man’s land” at our physical border, these refugees are living in host countries who give them limited permission to stay while they go through the U.S. resettlement process. In many cases, family members of refugees already resettled are forced to wait years for permission to be reunited with their loved ones.

In September, the U.S. government took another decisive step back from addressing this global humanitarian need when it set its fiscal year 2020 (October 2019 to September 2020) admissions goal at 18,000 people, the lowest resettlement target since the passage of the 1980 Refugee Act. This severe reduction in resettlement has led to the widespread closing of U.S. resettlement programs and forced thousands of refugees ready to travel to wait indefinitely.

REFRAMING THE “OTHER”: HUMANIZING THOSE AT THE BORDER — AND BEYOND

It is natural to feel overwhelmed when trying to make sense of the ever-evolving list of changes to U.S. asylum, deportation and resettlement policies. How do we — as a community, a Church and a nation — care for the vulnerable? What does this even mean for U.S. Christians in the face of federal efforts to turn away refugees and asylum seekers? Being called to welcome doesn’t mean ignoring the existence of borders or the need for security measures. It means finding a way to see Jesus in the faces of the women and children, to be a nation of welcome to those who are fleeing conflict and despair.

In fact, the interfaith collaborations happening at the border focus on doing just that: offering services that recognize and honor the dignity of each person who comes through their doors, even in the midst of chaotic circumstances. Shelters on either side of the border are responding to a deeply felt call to welcome the strangers in their midst, to minister to their

needs and to stand with them in their pursuit of safety for their families. Indeed, all of these organizations find themselves in a pivotal moment: this call to ministry with asylum seekers is not short-lived, despite many financial and political challenges. As a pastor in Tijuana said, “When people ask me how we can do this ministry, I tell them that God will provide. And when again they ask ‘How?’ I again answer, “God will provide.”

PDA has repeatedly heard from those who have ministered to our brothers and sisters along the border in 2019 that there is a physical, spiritual, emotional and even political awakening that occurs through such encounters. Migrant journeys are long and hard, their destinations unknown and unfamiliar, and their reception by government officials uncertain and, in many ways, unwelcoming. And yet it is the people who serve who are humbled when the offer of shoelaces, bars of chocolate, a shower, and a clean, warm towel is met with tears. That a friendly face, a smile, a kind word or gentle touch can provide someone with identity,

A church in Tijuana has three-story bunkbeds in a basement dormitory.



dignity and human connection after such a harrowing trek is an incredible Holy Spirit moment. In situations like these, it doesn't take long to move beyond the labels of immigrant and refugee and simply see the faces of dislocated and desperate humanity.

And then, if we find a way to wrap our minds around the inconceivable hardships that were overcome in order to arrive in the U.S., it becomes that much more difficult to fathom the experiences of those forced to return to their country of origin after building a life in the U.S. over the course of 20 years. Yet that is what is happening to those from many countries, including those from El Salvador. Reintegration is hard work. Starting over is all the more difficult when the return was involuntary. Most returnees (the term they have chosen for themselves) have left family members behind in the U.S. without a parent or wage-earner. For some, there is no longer any home in El Salvador to go back to; others experience unsuccessful family reunions, leaving them twice displaced. Deep disappointment, anger, depression, fear and a sense of failure are all too familiar emotions. If these negative feelings are not addressed, they become paralyzing.



A young girl awaits her family's asylum trial in Auga Prieta, Mexico.

In April 2019, with support from PDA, the Reformed Calvinist Church of El Salvador (IRCES) embarked on a new ministry with returnees in partnership with a mutual help association called the Red Nacional de Emprendedores Retornados (RENACERES — which means rebirth), and the Salvadoran Institute of the Migrant (INSAMI). RENACERES develops employment opportunities through the establishment of enterprises led by and for returnees. After an initial intake by RENACERES members — familiar with life in the U.S., bilingual and bicultural, and most importantly, with an empathy born out of shared life experiences — new returnees are referred to a range of support services. INSAMI counselors and medical staff provide medical screenings, basic medical treatment, individual and group counseling, and referrals to specialists. IRCES steps in with transitional shelter services for returnees with no place to live while they develop longer-term plans while volunteers provide pastoral and psychological support. RENACERES, INSAMI and IRCES see productivity, physical and mental health, spiritual and emotional accompaniment as interrelated to the well-being of any individual. As they are supported by this network, returnees do not travel alone in their bewilderment and grief. There is hope and promise — even if they can't see it at first.

Powerful revelations like these are driving the devotional response within our connectional church. We are bombarded every day with inconsistent information regarding immigration and resettlement — so much of it contrary to U.S. legal precedents — putting people in harm's way. People with hopes and dreams just like ours, for a roof over their heads, safe place to build their lives with a job that provides enough to support their families. Because we recognize that the government's rulings on immigration and resettlement do not legally strip them of their personhood, PDA will continue to provide humanitarian assistance to all refugee families with basic needs, legal orientations and family reunification assistance even as we advocate for more humane treatment by the U.S. government.

A REFUGEE'S STORY

“When you can't communicate, everything is terrifying and confusing. At least in Sudan I could understand what was going on around me or ask questions. All I knew that day was suddenly the faces that were always happy were not smiling anymore. The news said it was Muslim terrorists. We didn't know what was going on, but at the time I couldn't even ask questions.”

Hager Ahmad, a Sudanese refugee, spent several years as an asylum seeker in Lebanon. When she arrived in August 2001, she and her small family were the first refugees in Waynesboro, Virginia — and then Sept. 11 happened. For a long time, people's stares in the street let her know they were frightened of her, which made her frightened of them. The situation left her in despair, and she worried about her family's decision to come to the U.S. Finally, she decided she was not going to fall into this trap any longer.

“Suddenly I thought, ‘As refugees, we are here, but we still don't feel like we've arrived. We need a way to communicate.’ And since then, I've been open to questions about my culture and faith. I know I can make a difference.”

Her impressions of refugees' experiences in the U.S. are mixed. “Some Americans think we are here to steal jobs or go on welfare, but most refugees are trying to put themselves back together after horrible suffering and just want to work hard to keep a job, whatever it is. Still, compared to when I got here, Americans are more open-minded and willing to make sure newcomers are accepted seamlessly into their neighborhoods. That's important because immigration doors are closing so quickly.”

Eager to facilitate understanding between Americans and refugees, Hager has been trained as a public speaker and advocate, sharing her experiences as both a woman



and a refugee. She is involved with multiple organizations in and around Waynesboro, one of which is Bridges, which conducts an intercultural community potluck and dance every three months at which people of all faiths socialize, learning about one another's cultures in a relaxed setting. She is also the founder and president of the Sudanese Community, Harrisonburg, VA, an organization of 13 families and 45 individuals that supports refugee families. Finally, as a certified medical interpreter and Arabic translator, Hager has worked with Church World Service, teaching Americans how to respond in a culturally appropriate manner to refugees in their community.

The move from asylum seeker to resettled refugee is an exhausting, disconcerting process that can take many years to navigate, usually while stuck in a dangerous place. For more information about U.S. refugee resettlement, go to pcusa.org/pda/refugee.

Hager Ahmad shares her story as part of a panel at Davis & Elkins College in West Virginia with PDA and Church World Service.

2019 in Review



In 2019, because of your generous support, PDA was able to grant more than **\$5 million** across the globe; support **7,354 work team volunteers** who helped those affected by disaster; **deploy 393** National Response Team members who spent **1,680 days** in the field in **52 presbyteries**; train **167 Presbyterian Women** in disaster preparedness; distribute PDA films on streaming platforms with the potential to reach more than **95 million homes**; and with Church World Service, aid in the collection and distribution of over **154,334 Gift of the Heart Kits and blankets. THANK YOU!**



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The one thing all Presbyterians agree on

**Introducing Matthew 25 in the
PC(USA): A bold vision and invitation**

We Presbyterians sure love to discuss, debate and make our individual voices heard! They say when three or more Presbyterians are gathered, there will be as many opinions.

Wouldn't it be amazing — stunning, even — if we could all agree on something really important? What if we could all come together with a common vision to unite all the PC(USA) and make us a more relevant force in the world? What if there were an epiphany — a spark — that could energize us all and

propel us out in a common mission to serve our communities and the world?

Matthew 25:31-46 calls all of us to actively engage in our communities and the world to act boldly and compassionately to serve the hungry, the oppressed, the imprisoned and the poor. Jesus invites us to be fearless and purposeful disciples.

Some of our congregations, of course, are already doing this great work. Others could use a little nudge.

**Find out more at
pcusa.org/matthew25**