

(Scott): In her poem “Home,” writer Warsan Shire writes,

“No one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark.

You only run for the border when you see the whole city running as well...”

Today on the show, we’re exploring borders. We’re hearing stories of people affected by the policies that say who can cross the U.S./Mexico border and who cannot. And we will look at the extra difficulty that COVID-19 puts on people navigating an already complex and often unsafe system.

I’m Scott Campbell and you’re listening to Relief, Development and Podcast, a production of Mennonite Central Committee.

(MUSIC FADES UP AND THEN DOWN AGAIN)

Josefa is seeking asylum and has been stuck at the U.S-Mexico border for more than a year. She was an engineer with an electric company in Venezuela, but after a nation-wide blackout she and her co-workers were targeted. She feared for her life and fled with her son to Mexico to seek asylum in the U.S.

Her court dates have continued to be pushed back because of COVID-19. Josefa is not her real name—we’re using a pseudonym to protect her identity. Here’s Josefa’s story about seeking asylum in the midst of a pandemic, with the English translation read by Andrea Ricardo Castro Serrano.

(Andrea for Josefa): They blamed us, saying the blackout was on the part of the electrical workers, which wasn’t true. That’s why the government intelligence persecuted us, investigated us, had meetings with us, took our phones and reviewed all our messages to look for information to blame us.

Some of my colleagues were unfairly detained, others were imprisoned, and one was found dead under strange circumstances.

I could no longer remain in Venezuela because at any moment I could become just like any of my colleagues.

One of the main challenges, and the biggest for me, was to have to leave my country alone with my son, reach the Mexican border and apply for asylum. It was very dangerous, and I was risking my life and that of my son.

But I intended to get to the United States and find my husband and my other son, in order to be together, one family.

(Meghan): When Josefa and her son got to the northern border of Mexico there was no space at the shelters. They didn’t know where to go. After waiting for four days at the port of entry, Josefa was allowed to enter the U.S. to begin her asylum claim, however she was then returned to Mexico and told that she had to continue with the rest of her case from there.

(Andrea for Josefa): When they told me no, I didn't know what to do. If being there was dangerous, going back to my country was much more so.

(Meghan): Her court date was set for April, but when the pandemic arrived in March, all court dates were suspended. The wait would be much longer than she thought.

(Andrea for Josefa): At that time, I was alone with my son. Every time I bought food, I had to leave him at home alone because supermarkets won't allow kids under 12 due to COVID. Every time that moment came, it was stressful for me because I didn't want to leave him.

I told my son, "Anything happens you call me or the neighbor immediately."

It's been a big challenge for me, facing this and the uncertainty of not knowing how much longer we were going to be in that situation.

MUSIC FADES OUT

(Scott): That was Josefa, an engineer and a mother who is seeking asylum at the Mexico/U.S. border. We're going to hear the rest of her story later in the show.

But first, I'm speaking with Katherine Smith. She is the border and migration coordinator for MCC's West Coast office. She works with people and organizations in Arizona along the U.S./Mexico border and assists at a migrant shelter in Tucson that supports asylum seekers who have legal permission to enter the U.S.

Katherine has also written letters to detained migrants, connecting them with resources and offering words of kindness. She educates churches and constituents through learning tours and other speaking engagements.

Welcome, Katherine. I'm so glad you could join us.

(Katherine): Hi, thanks. I'm glad to be here with you.

(Scott): We're going to talk a lot today about asylum seekers coming to the U.S. Can you help us understand some of the reasons people seek asylum?

(Katherine): So according to international law, everyone has the right to seek asylum. And asylum is pretty much a legal protection that is granted to someone who is unable or unwilling to return to his or her home country because of either persecution or a well-founded fear of being persecuted in the future based on the account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion.

So, regarding the reasons why people seek asylum, we can look at the root causes of migration. So, there's usually violence, structural inequality, lack of jobs, and maybe extreme weather that's even worsened by climate change. And this all contributes to keeping families trapped in poverty. And then this poverty kind of worsens with corruption where the money is being robbed from the people and social services and

health care, and education. And it's leaving the poorest people without the ability to pay for alternatives.

And so this corruption can even be traced to colonialism. So, we continue to see many people who are fleeing Central America, which is made up of countries who were all ruled by European powers that exploited and oppressed Indigenous groups. So even after these countries gained independence, foreign intervention continued and led to civil wars, to coups to human rights abuses, which all continue to influence and fuel corruption and violence, which is encouraging people to migrate.

(Scott): There's been a lot of news about asylum seekers recently at the Mexico/US borders. What are some of the concerns or challenges that you're hearing about right now?

(Katherine): The current situation at the Mexico/U.S. border is very complex, and even more so now, because of COVID. But many of the challenges that asylum seekers are facing right now are really the direct result of previous policies that were created to deter people from coming to the U.S. to seek asylum. So, these policies are metering, which is when the U.S. caps the amount of people who could enter the U.S. to seek asylum, and MPP—which is Migrant Protection Protocols, better known as “remain in Mexico,” which is when the U.S. began to process asylum seekers at the port of entry. And then they would return them to Mexico and wait for their court hearing in the U.S.

And this is actually what happened to Josefa, an asylum seeker from Venezuela. And while the U.S. kept postponing her court dates due to COVID, she still had to travel 12 hours on a public bus to present herself at the port of entry, so they could give her a new court date in the future. And now her dates have been postponed month by month for over a year.

So, both of these policies, metering and MPP, have created a massive backlog of people who are waiting to enter the U.S. and are in a similar position as Josefa. So, the challenge right now is that a lot of migrants, including children, have been waiting in Mexico to enter the U.S. for more than a year. And there's a huge lack of clarity and knowledge as to how and when they will be able to enter the U.S. and go through their credible fear interview, which is what could then lead to the ability to apply for asylum, which in reality is just us upholding U.S. asylum law. And then kind of on the flip side of that, the Biden administration has begun to allow unaccompanied minors and some families to enter the U.S. to find safety.

But the concern with that right now is that people are not being treated or they're not being welcomed in the best way right now. So especially with COVID, space is limited in border facilities, which has led to what they call street releases. So that's where asylum-seeking families are processed by DHS, Department of Homeland Security, and then they're released to the street. So, this could be a gas station, Jack-in-the-Box, Staples. These are all places that I have known people to be dropped off kind of just at the parking lot of these places.

So now the responsibility for these people who are entering the U.S. is on humanitarian groups and non-profit shelters, to arrange for travel even to just get to their facility and then offer hospitality to these families as they try to connect with their sponsor in the U.S. And that's where they'll stay through their immigration proceedings.

(Scott): I had no idea. That sounds, I would say unsustainable. But you know, just unbelievable. It doesn't sound like a plan doesn't sound like a system.

(Katherine): Yeah, but it's really not sustainable. I think that's a great word. We're kind of just reacting right now. And I hope that we can get to a point where we do have a much more sustainable system.

(Scott): You were saying that there's people who are being turned away at the border, some people who are being allowed entry but then kind of being just dropped off. What happens to those folks?

(Katherine): So, for the past few months now, these families and unaccompanied minors have entered the US. They've passed a credible fear interview, and the majority of them have sponsors in the U.S. However, our system doesn't really have the space or the resources to house all of these people.

So, what they do is that they ... can house them for up to 72 hours. And then once that 72 hours is up, they need to be released. They no longer can be in Immigration and Customs Enforcement, kind of under their watch. And so, they're released to the streets. And they're released to the streets right now because the U.S. is saying that they don't have really the resources to take them by bus to all of the different shelters.

So, what's happening right now is that these families are being released, usually in small towns that are close to Border Patrol facilities. They're released there. And then different humanitarian groups are chartering buses to go pick these families up, and then take them to the shelters.

(At a shelter where I serve), the first thing that we do is a COVID test. We figure out who is in their family, where they're coming from, where they're going. And then once they ... are clear, and they are COVID negative, then we'll connect them with their family members. And they'll usually stay one to two days where we offer, obviously, food, a room, shower, clothing, and just the ability to connect with their family. If they test positive, we have hotel rooms, actually, where they will quarantine for two weeks. And then once they are COVID negative, they'll go through the same process and be able to be reunited with their sponsor.

(Scott): We know that COVID rates are actually much higher in the U.S. than in Central America or Mexico, where most of these asylum seekers are coming from. So they face a lot of risk coming to the U.S. and especially in the process of trying to cross the border. From what you're hearing, how has COVID-19 impacted asylum seekers themselves?

(Katherine): I just mentioned two policies before that have worked to dismantle the asylum system. And even more recently, there was an immigration policy that was implemented kind of in direct response to COVID. And that actually is really what is impacting asylum seekers. So, in March of 2020, just over a year ago, the border closed to all nonessential travel. And this was kind of to slow the spread of disease. And as you can imagine, with the 10s of 1000s of people who were already waiting at the border in Mexico and now with the Port of Entry being closed indefinitely, this really encouraged some people to start entering the US between the ports of entry. But then at the same time that the border closed, the U.S. began to expel or return every person who entered the U.S. and this is under a policy called Title 42. And so, these expulsions, in kind of response of COVID, are still happening. And many people are returned to Mexico in the middle of the night. So maybe between 1a.m. to 3 a.m., the U.S. is returning busloads of asylum seekers to Mexico.

And in even more specific example of this. I received a call one day from a woman who was in New York, and she was searching for her sister and nephew. It was a mother and a son, who was about 12 years old. And they entered the U.S. with a group and then they were then separated from each other. They were both processed in the same Border Patrol facility and not told that the other was there. And the mom was returned to Mexico, and then the child was returned to Honduras. And this is because of Title 42, the policy that is saying that no one can enter the U.S. without a visa because there is a risk of COVID.

And so a family was separated when they maybe could have just been tested to see if they had COVID or not; they could have been quarantined. So that was a pretty unfortunate situation, and unfortunate that people are still being expelled during the night.

So, asylum seekers are really suffering right now. Yes, because of COVID and the health risks that are associated with it. But also, because COVID influences policies like Title 42 that are restricting the already limited access to enter the U.S. And then I would also add that the already crowded shelters in Mexico have had to reduce capacity or close their doors because of COVID.

And so, I remember towards the beginning of the pandemic, when migrants were telling me that they have nowhere to go, and that at that time, there was a curfew in Mexico and people were not allowed to congregate outside. But if you were in a new place without a home, not allowed to be in the shelter during the day, where are you supposed to go? I don't know, what would you do? You know?

Because of COVID and lack of shelter, it's also been super easy for people to determine who is a migrant. And that has led to even more extortion and exploitation of migrants. So really, with all of this being said, asylum seekers went from one terribly difficult situation to an even more difficult and vulnerable situation that as of now has no end date.

(Scott): It strikes me that these policies are these practices—dropping people off once they've been processed to kind of fend for themselves or delivering people back to Mexico in the middle of the night, or separating families—seems to be in conflict with the right to seek asylum. Seeking asylum is legal, yes?

(Katherine): Yes, it is legal. In the 1980s, the U.S. codified the asylum law, saying that everyone has the international right to seek asylum. So right now, we are kind of, we're just yeah, we're going against that. And the asylum system really just, over the past few years, has become dismantled. And so we are not upholding that right now at all.

(Scott): For you personally, how has COVID-19 impacted how you go about your work?

(Katherine): Well, like most people, I have been working from home for the past year. And before that, I used to host a lot of Borderlands learning tours at the border. And I'm also coordinator at a migrant shelter called Casa Alitas. And before I used to visit with and accompany migrants who are ... detained in long term detention centers, and kind of through that, really a lot of my work was just interacting with asylum seekers. But since COVID, a lot of that has been put on pause.

And really, for the past year, almost no one, like I said, has been able to enter the U.S. So we have this huge shelter with a space for like 300 people, and we were only using or housing maybe one to five guests a week if that. So, before COVID, I was able to welcome people and sit and talk and just spend time together. And the shelter had a very open feel. And now volunteers are administering COVID tests and we're wearing masks and face shields, and everyone at the shelter has to eat at their own room, and they can't pick out their own clothing. So, I would say overall, there's definitely a personal aspect of my work that has been lost.

Scott: Yeah, I can see how that would really impact the quality of the experience that someone could be offered, who's gone through so much and worked through a system that seems established to make it a horrific experience in many ways. And I'm thinking now that some folks are released, some folks are turned back, others are held in detention centers. What do we know about the detention centers and how COVID has impacted how those detention centers operate?

Katherine: Like I mentioned, I used to visit with migrants who are in for-profit detention centers. And then as the border began to close, so did the centers close to the public, I should say. So for the past year, I have been just writing letters with detained migrants who almost, I would say, all of them are asylum seekers. And I've learned a lot about what they're experiencing from within the detention centers through their letters and through phone calls.

So, really, for months during the beginning of the pandemic, PPE (personal protective equipment) was almost nonexistent in the detention centers. And every day hundreds of employees would enter the facilities, leaving the migrants really vulnerable and susceptible to anything that someone could bring from the outside, especially when the

setting that they're in is not conducive to social distancing. As well, hygiene supplies and you know, access to critical medical care were neglected. And so as COVID cases rose on the outside, they rose on the inside as well. And I'm in Arizona, so there were, there was a high amount of COVID cases.

And so as cases rose, they closed the cafeteria, and everyone had to eat in their cells and all of the hot meals were stopped. So they were just fed like turkey and ham sandwiches three times a day. And there were a lot of reports that the food being served was spoiled and expired. And since they all live in such close quarters, if one person became sick, everyone in that same pod would need to quarantine for weeks on end. And so there was kind of this never-ending cycle of quarantine with little to no information as to why and when they would be able to leave their cells. So, a lot of people have said that instead of receiving medical assistance, they were just put into solitary confinement.

So kind of the combination of use of force from the people who work there, inadequate masks, unsanitary conditions, medical neglect. They all played a part in creating a very unsafe condition, which has been likened to a tinderbox on the verge of explosion. And even in Arizona at La Palma Detention Centre, migrants were pepper sprayed when they had a peaceful protest to demand more masks. So yeah, overall, it's been an extremely horrifying situation that is happening for migrants in detention centers, who for the most part are asylum seekers and have passed a credible fear interview and are going through their immigration asylum proceedings from within the detention center when, in reality, they do not need to be in there.

(Scott): You mentioned that you've been writing letters, and we have one of those letters from an asylum seeker that you've been in contact with who's held in one of these detention centers.

For security reasons, I won't refer to him by name. I want to play you a recording of that letter. It's read by Giovanni Cruz Galindo, one of the MCC reps in Mexico.

(Typewriter sounds)

August 29, 2020

Dear Ceci and Rocio,

It's a pleasure to greet you once more from here, where I now find myself in a detention center.

I am happy that you have been able to receive and read my mail. My dear Ceci, I don't know why, but I have not been able to receive your letters. The last time I got one was in February, but thank you for adding me to your list so we can be in communication over the next several days or months that I am here. I don't know when I will be free, as I still have two court dates. The next one I have is on September 2nd, but with the pandemic, it is difficult. I don't know if they will postpone it because I am in quarantine.

I am from Honduras, dear.

Lately, here in the detention center things have been really difficult. We've been in quarantine since August 21st because on August 19th, they did a COVID-19 test, and some people tested positive.

They stopped giving us hot food, and now they give us cold food three times a day that includes two slices of ham, two pieces of sandwich bread, one cookie, and a beverage packet. That is all the food, and what's hard about this is that it's three times a day. It's hard to eat it, but we have to because there is no other food.

I still have two court dates and I don't know what's going to happen with me. I had a court date for September 2nd but with this pandemic I think they will postpone it to another date. I don't know. It's difficult for me. I have to be strong and always ask Father God to help me move forward and overcome this, and that everything would work out for the best for all of us who are detained in different detention centers this in country.

(Scott): Wow. I can see why you care about this work. That's quite an impactful letter. Since we recorded that story, we've heard that he has won his case and been granted asylum. Excellent news!

Now Katherine, I imagine you've learned so much from this work. Can you talk a bit about what you've learned?

(Katherine): Yes, I have learned a lot. I have learned resilience, hope, strength, I would say very deep faith, welcome, trust, and even friendship. But also, I would say I've learned that there's great suffering, and a suffering that I don't think I will ever know. And that it's taken us a long time to kind of get to the point where we are now, regarding the way in which we view and dehumanize migrants, especially who are indigenous or people of color. And I think it'll take a long time for us to heal kind of the hurt and heal the countries of where people are leaving, and kind of to get to a point where welcome is not a radical idea, but that it's our way of being. So most of all, I think I've learned that I do not have all the answers. Also, I would just say hope again, I think if I were to walk away from this work, the one thing that would stick with me would be a more full and beautiful sense of what hope is.

(Scott): What can people do to help asylum seekers and address the concerns about COVID-19 at our borders?

(Katherine): There is a lot that you can do. I think, first I just want to mention that arrivals at the U.S./Mexico border, even before COVID, post COVID typically increase in the spring every year. And so the 2021 migration patterns are just following this trend. It does just look a little different because of how limited that access became this past year. And so with that in mind, MCC's Washington office right now has two action alerts that relate to migrants at the border who are impacted by COVID.

So the first call is to restore asylum protections and decriminalize our immigration system. So this is calling on U.S. Congress to, among other things, fully restore the asylum system to provide safe, fair and humane processing for those seeking safety. And then the second is the foreign assistance COVID alert. And this calls to ensure an equitable global pandemic response, which gives extensive background on vaccine access and then has a more general ask that combines humanitarian and economic relief with vaccine access. Both of those can be found easily at washington.mcc.org.

And then we also have [Borderlands learning tours](#). And I think this kind of gets away from the point of helping people right now at the border. But I think a lot of it has to do with learning about our immigration system. I think the more that you know, the more that you can offer long-term assistance. So something like a learning tour: we've had them in person in the past and online this past year, and there will be opportunities in the future to attend one of those. And then there are many shelters in the southern U.S. that are in need of material goods and financial funds.

But I would say no matter if you are near the border or not, there are migrants and asylum seekers who are near you and are arriving to probably places near where you live. So I always encourage people to look up asylum services in your area because I'm sure they are in need of support there where you are right now just as much as they are and we are at the border currently.

(Scott): The sounds like challenging work. That's been made even more challenging because of policies and practices and COVID-19. When you're feeling the weight of this work, what gives you hope?

(Katherine): I think simply put, I would say that what gives me hope, is my faith. And that's what keeps me going. I honestly don't think I would still be here working along the border without the faith I have in Jesus. And so when I reflect on scripture, you know, I can't turn my eyes away from a saviour who himself was on the move, who was a refugee, who is someone who did not look down on the oppressed or outcasts, but rather worked for their liberation. So, I'm fortunate to have a job in which daily I'm reminded of Jesus' actions, and I'm able to kind of through that work alongside my faith, welcome others.

And kind of going back to what I've learned, I think, what also gives me hope and motivates me to continue this work is the interaction that I have. You know, these aren't just stories to me. These are real people and faces that I that I get to interact with every day. And I think that is also what motivates me is having personal connections with the people who kind of are glossed over in the news or kind of portrayed in one way when I am able to see them in a different way.

(Scott): Katherine, it's been wonderful speaking with you today. Thank you for the insights. Thank you for the first-hand experience. It's been a really rich conversation.

(Katherine): Yes. Thank you so much for having me. And thank you for being interested in this.

(Scott): That was MCC's Border and Migration coordinator, Katherine Smith.

Now I'd like to return to Josefa, who we heard from at the beginning of the show. Where we last left her, she was in a challenging situation, having to leave her son alone when she goes to get groceries.

She felt less alone and better supported when she connected with the Kino Border Initiative, who support and defend asylum seekers. The organization launched a campaign called "Save Asylum," a coalition that includes MCC staff, including Katherine who I just spoke with.

(Andrea for Josefa): They invited us to participate so our voices could be heard, so we could raise our voices so the American authorities wouldn't forget about us.

I saw this as a big opportunity, and I went. I participated in meetings, contributed and offered support, because suddenly I was part of the solution.

Not just me, but all of us from different nationalities who were applying for asylum --we felt heard, we felt cared for.

And my son, too, loves going to the [organization] and interacting with other boys.

They pay attention to him, play with him when I am in meetings. It's so nice because there's this sense of not being alone, that there are others as we are fighting for a common good.

Asylum seekers are people who seek protection and safety. I hope authorities might please have the chance to permit those who apply for asylum as an established international right without many obstacles, without many restrictions, because immigrants not only suffer from the situation we are living, but we also suffer because upon applying, the doors do not open. It's a double suffering.

I hope that other immigrants never lose hope or faith, that they know they are not alone. There are many defenders of human rights that are doing an excellent job supporting immigrants so that they can have a better future.

(Scott): That was Josefa, who is still awaiting her court date for asylum. To learn more about the issues we talked about on the show today and [how you can advocate](#) for a safer and fairer asylum system, check out the link in our show notes. We've got a letter-writing tool that makes advocating easy.

Next month, I'm speaking with [Issa Ebombolo](#). He is MCC's National Peacebuilding Coordinator in Zambia and Malawi. He will talk about a new restorative justice program that MCC is supporting in correctional facilities across Zambia. Issa is also the founder of Peace Clubs, an MCC partner that teaches peacebuilding skills in schools around the world.

If you had a chance to sit down with Issa to ask him a question, what would you want to know? Send us your questions by email at podcast@mcc.org and we might feature your question on the show.

This episode of Relief, Development and Podcast was produced by Meghan Mast, Elizabeth Miller-Derstine and the head producer is Emily Loewen. Linda Espenshade does the background research for the show.

Thank you again to Katherine Smith for speaking with me, for listeners Laura Pauls Thomas and Katie Laban who submitted questions for Katherine. And special thanks to the anonymous asylum seeker for sharing his letter and to Giovanni Cruz Galindo for reading the letter. Thanks also to Josefa for sharing her story and to Andrea Ricardo Castro Serrano for recording the translation.

If you like this podcast, it would be great if you could subscribe and rate it and tell your friends to give us a listen!

A lot is happening in the world right now. This is a difficult time for many. May you experience God's provision and protection as we work together to share God's love and compassion for all in the name of Christ.

Thanks, and take good care.

(Music plays us out)