



Migrants Get a Boost from Area Episcopal Churches

By Francesca Kelly

OSCAR HASN'T SEEN his wife and young children in over a year, and he has no idea when he will see them again. His sister Maria brought her children with her but worries about her ailing mother back home.

Both Oscar and Maria, whose names have been changed to protect them and their family members, made a harrowing five-month-long journey through seven different countries to travel from their native land of Venezuela to the United States. They arrived in wintry Chicago a year ago, not knowing where they would sleep.

Unbeknownst to the exhausted new arrivals, open arms awaited them here on the North Shore.

In 2021 four North Shore Episcopal churches — Trinity Episcopal of Highland Park, St. Gregory's Episcopal Church of Deerfield, St. Elizabeth's Episcopal Church of Glencoe, and St. Lawrence Episcopal Church of Libertyville — created a partnership called Better Together, where they tackle joint projects and hold communal worship services. Because the Episcopal Diocese of Chicago had declared itself a "Sanctuary Diocese" in 2019, encouraging its member churches to "serve as places of welcome, refuge, and healing," these four churches collaborated to create a Migrant Ministry. Says Reverend Bryan Cones, rector of Trinity Episcopal Church in Highland Park, "Our family of churches felt called to respond to so much unmet need in Chicago and felt confident we had the resources to do so. Welcoming migrants is for many Christians an obligation — no matter how people arrive."

After successfully helping two Afghan refugees to find housing and jobs, the Migrant Ministry got a call in February 2023 from the Sanctuary Working Group, a collegium of Chicago-area religious leaders. Several families from Venezuela — including Oscar, Maria and Maria's children — urgently needed a place to land. Ministry members stepped up, finding the new arrivals housing, supplies and food — some of them using a Spanish translation app on their cell phones to communicate. A couple of months later, another family from Venezuela joined the original guests. After the birth of Maria's daughter's baby in summer 2023, there were 14 asylum-seekers from Venezuela living together under one roof.

The various members of the four churches' Migrant Ministry have coordinated contributions of cash, food, clothing, and linens, mostly from individual congregation members. Jack Alix of Trinity Episcopal, who has been a key organizer, feels that "this ministry perfectly captures Christ's teachings regarding our love for our neighbors. Helping our migrant siblings has given us an opportunity to be kind, caring and compassionate to others."

Cones, Alix and other members of the Migrant Ministry have also arranged for immigration lawyers to help the migrants file paperwork seeking asylum. Because the migrants are in legal limbo, it has been hard for them to find full-time employment. St. Lawrence member Karen Broms, who along with Mark Tilton (St. Elizabeth's), Alix and Diane Beckway (Trinity) has been instrumental in the daunting tasks and paperwork associated with helping the migrant families acclimate, points to one of the biggest problems for migrants: employment. "New arrivals are admitted but can't legally work until they have an Employment Authorization Document, which can take six to 12 months or more," explains Broms. Still, some family members have found part-time menial work such as washing dishes and were even able to pool their resources to buy and share a small used car. It is the hope of the migrants and those helping them that they will be able to support themselves by this summer.

Shortly after Christmas, Oscar and Maria sat down with a small group from the Ministry to tell their story: how their journey to America was mostly on foot; how the most difficult segment was through the Darien Jungle, between Colombia and Panama, which took eight days. There, they followed a trail that had been marked by blue plastic bags tied to trees. They experienced hunger and fear: fear that was reinforced by the discovery of corpses of other sojourners who had drowned in flash floods, been bitten by poisonous snakes, succumbed to illness, hunger or exhaustion — or had been murdered. There was no cellphone signal; no way to get help. But, except for in the thick of the jungle, at almost every other point throughout their

travels, explained Oscar, locals were there to guide them — for a price, of course. He estimated that it cost them around \$3000 to make this journey.

Why leave Venezuela at all? Since the collapse of Venezuela's economy, inflation and corruption have made daily life untenable. "The supermarkets are full," explained Carmen Myers, who served as translator during the interview. "You can find everything you need there. But you must pay in dollars and prices are exorbitant." So, who can afford to live there? "Mostly foreigners," answered Oscar. "Only about 20 percent of Venezuelans can survive on the economy. The others are being helped by people like us, who have come to America for work."

Has America been what they expected? Not quite. In Venezuela, many myths persist about America and what it offers immigrants, Oscar explained. "They are saying, 'Oh, when you go to the States, you can make \$1500 a week. You can easily buy a car.' But the reality has not been as wonderful as we imagined." Still, both Oscar and Maria reiterated that they are grateful to be here.

What do they want people to know about them? "Americans might have prejudices about us," Oscar replied. "We want them to know that many Venezuelans are highly educated. That we're hard-working people. We love our country and would not have left if we didn't feel we had to." And they also feel stronger, because of all they have been through. "I don't take things for granted now," said Oscar, "especially time with family." Maria added, "We only spend what is absolutely necessary. And we never throw away food!" Oscar pointed to a plate of Christmas cookies on the table. "On our journey, we would have died for one of these."

Would they do it all over again? Oscar says he would. As hard as it's been, he is hopeful about eventually being able to get his wife and children to America. But Maria says no. "If for any reason I would have to go back to Venezuela, I would not make this journey again. It's just too risky." However, they are both glad to have found some work and to be able to assist with their mother's medical expenses. They appreciate the help they have been given.

That help has come from dedicated members of all four churches. Diane Beckway, one of the volunteers who has bought groceries and driven the families to appointments, is inspired by a sense of American history. "At one point or another," she reflects, "most of us who are blessed to be citizens of this country are the descendants of migrants. This work is just one way we can pay their gift forward." Says Trinity Rector Cones, "I have been encouraged by the generosity people have shown, and the way community members have joined in. It really has become a group effort, with lots of folks working together."

Meanwhile, unprecedented numbers of migrants have crossed the Southern border in the past year, with many more on the way. The recent busloads of migrants sent by Texas to Chicago have overwhelmed the system. Clearly, major reform is needed. Until then, churches and other groups are doing their best to help as many as they can. Says Alix of the North Shore Episcopal churches and their mission, "We may not be able to solve the big problem of migration and the human condition, but at least in our small way, we can make a difference and impact many who seek help. As the gospel of Matthew puts it: 'I was a stranger, and you welcomed me.'"

If you'd like to help or volunteer for the Migrant Ministry, find out more here: <https://www.trinitychurchhp.org/serving-others/asylum>

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...About the latest numbers arriving in Chicago: <https://www.chicago.gov/city/en/sites/texas-new-arrivals/home/Dashboard.html>

...About one family's story: <https://www.npr.org/2023/10/31/1207963084/venezuela-migrants-to-us>

...About Venezuela's economic crisis: <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/venezuela-crisis>

...About applying for asylum in America: <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/21/us/politics/migrant-crisis-border-asylum.html>

...About the dangerous Darien Pass: <https://apnews.com/article/immigration-latin-america-venezuela-ukraine-mexico-712d00c90114568fe8a1b5c9e26fdadd>