



## Listening to Immigrant Voices

# *Cruz-ando la Frontera* (Cross-walking the Border)

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Immigration is a hot topic these days. It is a hot topic because faith and politics are involved in crossing the U.S.–Mexico border of south Texas where I come from. Many immigrants continue to cross this border and end up at Casa Marianella, a shelter for displaced migrants in Austin, Texas, where I live. As the director of the Lutheran Seminary Program in the Southwest, I often take students to the center and to the border to meet the folks who have emigrated to this country from all over the world. We get to hear their stories which often remind me of the immigrant story of my family.

I am a second-generation Latino and a cradle Lutheran from south Texas. My father and grandparents crossed the border from Mexico in 1918 during the time of the Mexican Revolution. When they crossed the Rio Grande River they became a people of exile and diaspora much like the experience of the ancient Hebrew community who sang their songs of exile by the river of Babylon.

I was born near this Rio Bravo as it is called in Mexico. I was baptized at St. John's Lutheran Church in San Juan, the oldest Hispanic Lutheran Church in the continental U.S. founded in 1925. My mother was the daughter of Mexican immigrants, who reared her children in the Lutheran tradition. She was grateful to the early missionaries and many pastors who served the church over the years. She was grateful for the hospitality that she experienced in the church as the young daughter of immigrant parents who became confessing Lutherans soon after they crossed the border in 1913. Like my father and his family, her family also crossed the border as immigrants because of the political and economic unrest in Mexico.

My immigrant family became Lutheran due in large part to a German family, who ministered to them during the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918. The Mellenbruchs were a family of farmers who shared a similar experience. Originally from Germany, they had emigrated to this country seeking the fulfillment of the American Dream. They moved to south Texas to till the land and to improve their lives. The Cuban historian Justo González often reminds us that Latino Americans who trace their heritage to Mexico did not cross the border, rather the border crossed us! That's a historical reality dating back to the war with Mexico of 1846–1848 and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo of 1848 whereby Mexico ceded half

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of her territory to the United States.<sup>1</sup>

My family and the Mellenbruch family met at a crossroads in history.<sup>2</sup> They shared the experience of migration due to economic and political reasons. But this German family was distinctive in our community because of their hospitality and service to the Mexican community. This German family shared the gospel by reaching out to us, to my family, at a time of great need and crisis. They had what we call in Spanish, “*compasión*,” or what Bishop Pedro Casaldáliga of Brazil calls “the tenderness of the heart of the people.”<sup>3</sup> *Compasión* for the Latino or Hispanic people means “to suffer with” and includes the notion of justice in the sense of

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1. For an excellent review of this history see Justo González, *The Story of Christianity: The Reformation to the Present Day* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1985), 2:246–250.

2. A detailed history of the missionary movement of the Lutheran church in Texas is documented in T. Michael Mackey, ed., *The Roots and Dynamics of Lutheran Hispanic Ministry in Texas* (Austin: Lutheran Seminary Program of the Southwest, 1989).

3. Lecture presented by Bishop Samuel Ruiz of Chiapas, Mexico, at “2008 Hearts4Justice Conference,” Tijuana, Mexico, January 24, 2008.

a re-ordering of relationships with the neighbor.

Not only was there political, economic, and social unrest in Mexico, but the flu pandemic of 1918 caused great distress and death in the large Mexican immigrant and native Hispanic population of the Rio Grande Valley of south Texas. The Mellenbruch family was, in some respects, the strangers from the north who became the neighbors of the Mexican immigrants. They reached out to us with nursing aids to alleviate the great suffering caused by the flu pandemic. Laura and Irene Mellenbruch, mother and daughter respectively, visited the sick in their homes and nursed them with home remedies to alleviate the high fevers of my family. My mother recounted how Laura would carry an oil lamp with her when she visited the homes of the suffering.<sup>4</sup> Irene would teach Bible stories to the children who gathered on their front porch on Sunday mornings. The first pastor of the mission, which they sponsored, confirmed my mother in the Lutheran tradition.

I met Irene while serving as a pastor in San Antonio many years ago. She was in her 90s. She shared some remarkable stories and insights of those early years in the mission field. Irene was a border-crosser. She crossed cultural, linguistic, and theological borders for the sake of the gospel! She introduced the Lutheran tradition to many Latinas like my aunts, who became confessing Lutherans because of her ministry. She spoke Spanish fluently, my first language, and the language of the community.

It is the nature of border-crossing to be transformed by the experience. All who cross a border of some kind enter a liminal space where life as we know it becomes ambiguous and uncertain. We may question our identity in that “third space” between cultures, peoples, and nations. But this liminal space is also a threshold for new awareness, insight, and opportunity. Irene discovered this in relating to the *other*. She was so transformed by her border-crossing experience that she became bold and gifted in proclaiming the gospel in Spanish. She played the organ and introduced the Lutheran hymnody to the community. She played and sang the hymns in Spanish on a portable organ that she carried with her to the mission sites along the U.S.–Mexico border.

The Lutheran church of south Texas owes Irene and her mother, Laura, a great debt of gratitude for their tireless efforts in serving the immigrant community. At St. John’s in San Juan, Texas, an oil painting of Laura hangs in the fellowship hall of the church with the nameplate: “Laura Mellenbruch, Mother of Mexican missions.” When I look at the painting, I give thanks to God for these women of faith who reached out to my immigrant family from Mexico and left us a legacy of hospitality to the stranger.

What can we glean from this true story of our Lutheran immigrant history? I believe we all share an immigrant story. *We are an immigrant church that crossed borders of oceans and rivers to become a part of the fabric of the American story.* Our bishops often remind us of this reality.<sup>5</sup> Pastor Holger Nielsen, who bap-

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tized me at St. John Lutheran Church, was an immigrant from Denmark who came to this country as a child. The Nielsen, the Mellenbruch, and the Alanís families were all immigrant families. They all shared the experience of emigration due to economic or political reasons, something that anthropologists and sociologists remind us has been true of human history from its very inception. They remind us that what is relatively new in modern history is the national and political borders that arose from nation-building, but the movement and migration of the human family has never ceased; it is a not a new phenomenon. It is part of the cultural landscape or “text” that we inherit as a people and as a church.

When asked how I feel about border-crossing immigrants who serve me daily in my community, I say that my theological perspectives of compassion and justice always trump the legal and political arguments. Instead I choose to learn their names, just like the Mellenbruch family learned the names of my immigrant family. In this way I choose to cross over my own borders and misperceptions in human relating and try to see the *other* as Christ would invite me to see them, as Christ himself. That was the ministry of Laura and Irene Mellenbruch with my family. They were the *other* women in our community of faith. They invited us into their sacred spaces and brought healing to the community with the tenderness of their hearts.

Irene sowed the seeds that would give rise to the oldest Hispanic Lutheran Church in the continental U.S. She sowed the border-crossing seeds of the gospel that are still bearing fruit one hundred years later. Perhaps her greatest lesson to us today is that the border is not just a geopolitical barrier across the sand or a river or even a wall that separates two peoples and countries. A border is sometimes located within us. It is a human construct of the mind and heart. A border is anything that divides us from each other and prevents us from seeing each other as a people created in the image and likeness of God. A border divides and separates, and often causes injustice, but it is also a place of encounter with the other that offers us the possibility of new creation and mutual transformation.<sup>6</sup>

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delivered at the Tri-Synodical clergy conference, Galveston, Texas, January 30, 2008).

6. For an excellent review of the borderland psyche and the potential for new creation and identity, see Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999).

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4. Conversation of December 28, 2007, in San Juan, Texas.

5. Bishop Mike Rinehart of the Texas-Louisiana Gulf Coast Synod affirms that the Lutheran Church is a pro-immigrant church that welcomes foreigners and strangers as part of her mission (sermon

peoples apart also contains within it a hidden opportunity for sharing the gospel of reconciliation and caring for the other. She walked with my community of faith. She had compassion for the sick and invisible others of her day. Together with her mother, Laura, she reached out to my family with a gospel of care and healing. As friends and sisters in Christ who shared the gospel with their neighbors, Irene and Laura and their family were the neighbors of reconciliation and healing. Irene crossed over her own church-imposed boundaries as a lay woman because her confession and witness of faith compelled her to be a bridge-builder and border-crosser among peoples of diverse cultures and nations, preaching the gospel wherever she crossed a border. Laura and Irene became the visible presence of Christ in my community.

Laura and Irene taught us that to become Lutheran did not mean that we had to become German or Scandinavian, but that we could celebrate our faith and tradition in our own language and culture as a gift of God. There was no shaming involved for who we were because they saw us with the eyes of faith, as valued human beings created in the image and likeness of God.<sup>7</sup> So if they were here today, I would suspect that they might be asking these questions of the church:

### **For Discussion:**

1. What are the borders that divide us and hold us captive to ourselves or to our past—as human beings, as a culture, and as a church?
2. What is the cause of the fear and anxiety that is keeping the church from reaching out to those whose document status, or culture, is different from our own?
3. What are the borders and the human constructs that prevent us from seeing the immigrant as someone created in the image and likeness of God?
4. How can we be the neighbors who serve others with compassion as agents of reconciliation?
5. How can we move from charity to justice?

Our answers may propel us into a liminal space of new awareness, new relating, and new opportunities for service. Together as border-crossers we may rediscover the amazing grace of God in the tenderness of our hearts.

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7. For an in-depth analysis of this missionary history and its theological implications, see Javier Alanís, “Dignity for the Foreigner: A Study of the Doctrine of the *Imago Dei* from a Lutheran Hispanic/Latino Perspective,” (Ph.D. diss., The Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, 2002), esp. chapter 5.