



Welcoming the Stranger

We continue to learn what it means to be the presence of Christ as we serve among the immigrant community in San Francisco. In this challenging economic downturn, and divisive political climate, many of the family situations we encounter are not problems that any of us can easily fix, much less when our broken systems won't allow it. We want so much to put our education and resources to work in order to help someone solve their problem. We're much less inclined to enter into their sufferings. Yet, we have been greatly surprised and blessed when we simply come alongside families to provide company and support so they do not need to feel alone in their trials. Recently I was able to accompany a mom, a victim of domestic violence, to a custody review hearing. I was not able to take away her pain or fix her broken relationship with her ex-husband. What I could offer was to simply receive and extend God's care, not only for her...or for me...but also for the man who had abused her. I continue to be amazed by how God uses simple acts of joining people in their struggles to bring restoration and transformation into a broken world. Whether it is bringing a meal to someone who is homebound, accompanying someone in court, or speaking out in public hearings for more just and humane policies, God is present. Please join us in prayer as we continue to learn what it means to care for the "strangers in our midst" that they would know the love of Christ through our words and deeds.

- Pam Chao, Associate Director

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Stay in touch with Grace Urban Ministries, a San Francisco-based nonprofit that serves the Church's mission to bear witness to the just and compassionate reign of Christ.

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Resonant Aliens

- Craig Wong, Grace Fellowship Community Church & Grace Urban Ministries

Good and just societies require a narrative...that helps them know the truth about existence and fight the constant temptation to self-deception. – Stanley Hauerwas, *the Story-formed Community*

Earlier this year, I had the privilege of joining a contingent of evangelicals to visit Nogales, a town that straddles the U.S. and Mexico border. There, Cecilia shared her story, weary from a four-day trek across the Sonora desert where she injured her feet and nearly drowned in a flashflood...only to be captured by the Department of Homeland Security and tossed back onto her side of the fence. Some would consider Cecilia fortunate, particularly those who have lost daughters to corrupt "coyotes" who raped, robbed or abandoned their charge.

If Cecilia had successfully evaded the border patrol, she may have made her way to Maricopa County, whose Sherriff has received national attention for arresting over 32,000 illegal immigrants, putting many of them in tent cities, pink underwear and chain gangs. This fate hangs over the head of millions daily, especially in Arizona where →

God's Peace at Sanchez Elementary

- Elana Quan, dental volunteer from *Promised Land Fellowship*

Although I had helped with GUM's dental screening before, I was feeling a little apprehensive because this time I was coming without my boss, Dr. Yee. But when that morning came, I felt a deep sense of peace. I left my house a little earlier just in case I got lost. I made my way upstairs to where the dental screening was taking place and was greeted by several familiar faces, church volunteers I had worked with in previous years. I was then introduced to my assistants, Beverly and Kathy, in my screening area. As I sat in the chair waiting for my first child to arrive, I again experienced an amazing sense of peace, God's perfect peace, for I knew that I had been prayed for. As I observed all of the volunteers around me, I could really see the body of Christ functioning as it should--each person using their God-given gifts to serve the children at Sanchez Elementary School. I saw some teaching the children how to brush and floss their teeth through stories, games and songs, while others guided the children to each of their stations. Some screened patients while another took photographs of the event. Four hours flew by as I checked for cavities, gave oral hygiene instructions, got to know Beverly and Kathy better, and met many smiling children. I found myself feeling sad about saying good-bye to the new friends I had made. I am looking forward to next year to once again serve and be a part of this lovely body of Christ. And I don't think I'll mind going alone. †



Prop 200 mandated a policy requiring public agencies to ID clients and hand any undocumented immigrants over to government authorities for deportation.

Rejection of the foreigner, of course, is as old as the bible, exemplified by the experience of the Israelites in the land of Egypt. Abraham, the “wandering Aramean,” Moses, Ruth, and Joseph, to name a few, all left their homelands under duress and became resident aliens in a strange and inhospitable land. Hence, whenever God’s people at last settled in a bountiful land of promise, they needed to constantly rehearse their story, one of alien-ness, delivered-ness, and ongoing identity as dependent and beloved people. For the Israelites, their true home was always to be Yahweh Himself, rather than the temporal sands beneath their feet.

As a fifth generation, college-educated, American citizen, my experience does not resonate much with that of weary wanderers like Cecilia. I did not have to leave loved ones, hire unscrupulous traffickers, incur debilitating debt, cross a blistering desert, or cry out to God in a desperate quest for work. I can shop, see a doctor, and go to church without fear. If I’m pulled over, I do not fear being cuffed, separated from my children, and whisked off to a detention facility without legal representation. I can go about my life, enjoying the benefits of a system that rewards me when I play by its rules. Mine is a narrative of privilege. But as a Christian, might I have another?

Theologian Stanley Hauerwas speaks of the Church as a story-formed people, a community shaped by the event of the cross and thus lives by a different set of rules. Hauerwas asserts that “the Church doesn’t *have* a social strategy, the Church *is* a social strategy,” one that embodies for the world a society that, apart from God, the world cannot pull off. Therefore, faithful congregations live eschatologically, as visible signposts of God’s good future...when the whole of creation will live as one, free of barriers and abundantly fed. We enact God’s big story, in the messiness of the here and now.

Which brings me back to Cecilia. What dark narrative forces her, and millions of others, to leave their families and risk death by dehydration or violence? Hers is a flight from economic despair, a reality uncomfortably tied to America’s attachment to “free market” ideology, concretized with devastating affect in the ratification of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994. A huge boon for American and Canadian agribusiness, NAFTA changed the game by allowing the dissolution of ejidos, i.e. farming collectives, into privately-owned parcels. The resulting multitude of small, independent farmers, unable to compete with the giants of the North, were (and still are) forced to leave to provide for their families. In this picture, the privileged (we Americans, that is) prosper at the expense of our Southern neighbors.

Their plight, shamefully underwritten by my own country’s specious trade policies, further fuels my longing for the Church to be the Church, living as a counter-narrative to the deceitful and inhumane scripts of a passing order. The migrant’s tale, like that of Cecilia’s, is an important gift, one that should strike a chord in us who, as God’s people, are called to live as sojourners in hostile territory. Her story should evoke, in our ecclesial conscience, the table at which needy sinners are graciously brought into communion with Christ and one another. We can join in solidarity with the strangers in our midst, together embracing a generous God who owns the cattle on a thousand hills, has enough for everyone, and does not need high-tech fences or barb wire to establish His peace on earth. †

Words from a new board member - Randy Chang

“Seeking the shalom of San Francisco would be to yearn for everyone everywhere to be able to experience life as God intends it (as we see in Genesis 1, Isaiah 65 and Psalm 104). This would call for a willingness to be in the places of brokenness with those excluded from shalom and those doing the excluding; to be instruments of grace to enable confession, repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation in broken relationships; and to be voices that speak prophetic truth to those in power. In these places, we can share people’s sadness, fears, and pain; we can persevere because we know what the future holds, and we can embody hope ...because our sovereign Lord is faithful.”

