

EVANGELICAL IMMIGRATION table.

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Ethics and Religious
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Convention

Faith and Community
Empowerment

National Association of
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National Hispanic
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Conference

The Wesleyan Church

World Relief

World Vision

April 10, 2019

Dear President Trump and Members of Congress:

As the humanitarian crisis at the U.S.-Mexico border escalates, we are deeply troubled by the recent announcement halting foreign aid to the Central American countries of El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala. We are writing to ask you to reverse this decision, which will both significantly harm many vulnerable people in these countries and exacerbate challenges at our border.

We acknowledge that the current situation, with an unprecedented number of children and families crossing the U.S.-Mexico border unlawfully and requesting asylum, has led to a humanitarian crisis. However, halting U.S. aid programs specifically designed to address the dynamics of violence, corruption and poverty that are the root causes of migration will likely lead more people to feel they have no choice but to flee their homelands and seek protection in the United States or elsewhere.

While foreign aid funds (to all countries, not just to Central America) constitute less than 1% of all U.S. federal spending, they have a remarkably positive impact on some of the most vulnerable people in the world. In the specific communities where USAID funds have been focused, there have been some dramatically positive results. In El Salvador, for example, USAID-funded programs helped drop homicide rates by 61 percent between 2015 and 2017. As Christians who believe that each of these lives is made in God's image and precious to him, we believe it would be immoral to cut effective, life-saving efforts.

In many cases, these funds support programs operated by faith-based organizations. World Vision's Puentes program in Guatemala, for example, is training tens of thousands of young people with job skills to improve their economic situation, reducing the motivation to migrate to the U.S. or elsewhere in search of employment. Former U.S. Ambassador to Honduras James Nealon credits the Association for a More Just Society, a Christian organization which he calls "probably the most important civil society organization in Honduras," with helping to shift a culture of corruption within the country's police force. These efforts – motivated by a biblical commitment to justice and funded in part by U.S. governmental funds – have helped contribute to an increase in criminal prosecutions and convictions and, as a result, a decline in the national homicide rate by more than 50% between 2012 and 2017.

Despite this progress, the situation in these Central American countries remains very difficult for many people. Violence and poverty levels remain high, which is a significant factor in why so many have left these countries and sought asylum in the U.S. in recent months. Cutting funds to programs that address these root causes will exacerbate the situations, undermining the progress that has been

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made and driving even larger numbers to undertake the dangerous journey toward seeking safety in the United States.

To be certain, the current situation at the border is a humanitarian crisis. There are governmental policy changes that could help, including:

- investing in additional asylum officers and immigration judges to ensure a fair and more efficient asylum adjudication process, while still respecting due process;
- facilitating asylum requests at ports of entry in a timely fashion, to avoid delays that direct desperate people to seek out Border Patrol agents after crossing the border between ports of entry to present their asylum claims;
- strategic improvements to border security; and
- greater utilization of alternatives to detention programs that minimize the detention of children and families while also ensuring that those with pending asylum claims show up for their hearings.

Beyond the government's role, local churches and ministries are already providing care for many asylum-seeking families who have been released in regions along the border, and we commit to supporting and encouraging this humanitarian response.

Fundamentally, though, the United States must address the root causes behind migration, and cutting funds to programs that do so is both inhumane and counter-productive. As Vice President Pence has rightly observed, "People will stay home if they believe there's a brighter future for them there." We urge you to keep our commitment to our Central American allies to fight against corruption and gang violence, strengthen the rule of law and spur economic growth, which will help solve this humanitarian crisis and ultimately decrease the number of migrants seeking protection in the United States.

Respectfully,

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Jo Anne Lyon, Ambassador, General Superintendent Emerita, The Wesleyan Church

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