

TEACHING THE REFORMATION IN MEXICO

This semester I am teaching three courses on Martin Luther and the Reformation (two online and one at the Lutheran Seminary). Given that the historical Protestant churches and especially the Lutheran churches are so small in Mexico and throughout most of Latin America, one might wonder what aspects of the story of the Reformation interest students.

Above all, many of the students relate to the oppressive practices and views of God that were common in Luther's day. They share experiences of oppression that they have had both in the Roman Catholic church and in many of the new "Evangelical" churches that have grown considerably in the past few decades. Many of these experiences have to do with the manner in which religion is used for the purpose of obtaining money; in these cases, churches become "businesses" that "sell" salvation in various ways, as was the case in Luther's Day.



In particular, fear is used in order to control and manipulate people in many churches. This fear is driven especially by threats of eternal condemnation or punishment in purgatory, yet there are also other fears, such as fear of marginalization and mistreatment within one's church. While one might suppose that those mistreated might simply leave their church, it is precisely fear regarding their eternal fate that keeps them there. In many cases, like the pope of Luther's day, ministers claim to be virtually "infallible" and do not allow their members to question their authority or their interpretations of Scripture. These are just some of the many aspects to which students relate when studying Luther and the Reformation.

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CHILD IMMIGRATION CRISIS CONTINUES

Although for many people it is no longer "news," the problem of child immigration from Central America to and through Mexico has continued. According to a series of articles published in one of Mexico's most important newspapers, El Universal (2/2/2017), the number of children detained by Mexican immigration authorities grew from 9,630 in 2013 to 35,704 in 2015. Although final figures are not yet in for 2016, the rate of detentions through October had increased slightly over 2015. You may remember that 2014 was the year of the Central American child immigration crisis at the U.S. border. The number of detentions in Mexico that year was much less—23,096—, which indicates that the crisis continues to grow more serious.



The percentage of children (age 17 or less) that were traveling without an adult has been around 50% each year. Almost all come from Guatemala, Honduras, or El Salvador, and most are fleeing from gang violence and death threats. According to The Guardian (2/5/2017), 33,000 people have been murdered in those three countries in the past two years, making them the most deadly countries in the world with the exception of Syria. In comparison to the almost 80,000 children detained by Mexican authorities in 2015-2016, about 100,000 made it into the U.S. Due to fear over the immigration policies of the new U.S. administration, however, an increasing number of Central American immigrants are remaining in Mexico rather than heading to the U.S.

Last year, the ELCA launched a program called AMMPARO to offer Protection, Advocacy, Representation and Opportunities to these children in their countries of origin, their countries of transit, and in the U.S. Information about AMMPARO is on the ELCA web site.