



LATIN AMERICAN LOCAL FAITH COMMUNITY RESPONSES TO VENEZUELAN MIGRATION

SEPTEMBER 2020



**“Latin American Local Faith Community
Responses to Venezuelan Migration”**

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Photos

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

ACYM	Iglesia Alianza Cristiana y Misionera
CWS	Church World Service
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IRC	International Rescue Committee
JRS	Jesuit Refugee Service
LAC	Latin America and the Caribbean
LFC	Local Faith Community
LGBTQI	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, and intersex
NGO	Non-governmental organization
UMCOR	United Methodist Church Committee on Relief
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children’s Fund
UN Women	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
WBG	World Bank Group



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And although the work of migrant faith communities is not the focus of this study, we wish also to recognize migrant-led efforts that mobilize support to their Venezuelan brethren, including through partnership with host community congregations and faith leaders.

Finally, CWS is grateful to its dedicated team who helped to conceive of, execute, edit and review this report, including Martin Coria, Silvana Faillace, Andrew Fuys, and former colleague, Elizabeth Frank. Their leadership and enthusiasm was essential to carrying out this study.

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FOREWORD

Since 1946, local faith communities have been at the heart of CWS responses to forced displacement. When we conceived of this research in 2019, it was because of our conviction that local faith communities remain as essential in welcoming the stranger in today's global migration context as they were nearly three-quarters of a century ago.

And yet, while our own connections to regional and national ecumenical networks in Latin America and the Caribbean are strong, we ourselves had not cultivated many relationships with grassroots faith communities – *the church in the neighborhood* – specific to migration. We knew, anecdotally, of many responses taking place with respect to the Venezuelan migration crisis. In looking to learn more about the work of Protestant, Evangelical and Pentecostal communities that comprise our faith base, we found a gap in documentation – and, it seemed, in broader recognition – of these important efforts to offer support to Venezuelans fleeing terrible conditions.

So, we embarked on a journey to understand where, how, and why local faith responses were being organized. Along the way, we reaffirmed the strong motivation of faith communities to care for the vulnerable. We learned about creative approaches to mobilizing local resources and volunteers. We met congregational leaders using their social capital to engage others, including migrant faith leaders, so that activities could be sustained and broadened. Many described a morally rooted commitment to accountability in providing care, not unlike standards for humanitarian assistance. We did not think it

when we began, but this journey felt like one of rediscovering our own roots as an organization.

In early 2020, not long after interviews were completed, the coronavirus pandemic became our global reality. Guayaquil, one of the locations where interviews took place, became the region's first epicenter. Migrants working in the informal economy are among the most vulnerable to the pandemic's impacts. Local faith communities have responded where they can, by offering temporary shelter to migrants facing eviction, or by calling governments to extend critical social protections to all persons in need, regardless of nationality. They have extended care and concern to Venezuelan migrants who are once again in transit – many facing acute distress, unable to stay where they are, yet without alternatives other than ones that lead back to the very same distress.

Times of crisis are when we most need to infuse action with hope and with faith. In the words of our President and CEO, Reverend John McCullough, *“The faith community has something powerful to offer to people when their hearts are breaking. No other community can speak better about hope than we can because no one knows the power of empathy more than we do; and no people is more capable of inspiring others to believe that there are solutions to the world's most complex problems because we believe that in God all things are possible.”* We hope that this report shines a light on the important roles of local faith communities in accompanying Venezuelan migrants; and we have faith that in seeing these efforts, we can also see a future that is free from the distress and suffering that so many people on the move face today.

Andrew Fuys

Senior Director - Global Migration
Church World Service



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As of June 2020, Venezuela ranks as the second-largest displacement crisis in the world, with an estimated 5.1 million Venezuelan refugees and migrants worldwide.¹ The scale of displacement has been “unprecedented [...] in magnitude and speed” in Latin America,² and will only be further complicated by the global pandemic.

While much attention has been paid to UN and international NGO responses to Venezuelan displacement, considerably less is known about how local actors, and faith communities in particular, have reacted. Catholic and Protestant local faith communities (LFCs) have had a role in supporting Venezuelan migrants in certain countries—indeed, it is often local groups that provide the first assistance to displaced persons in need.

This research has mapped and analyzed Protestant local faith community (LFC) responses to Venezuelan migrants and refugees in Latin America and the Caribbean. It sought to identify the services provided, and to offer analysis of how LFCs are responding, with the goal of giving visibility to important contributions already being made by local faith communities, and identifying additional opportunities that LFCs may consider strategic or beneficial to ensuring high quality services and support to Venezuelan migrants across the region. Although the work being done by Catholic Church groups is of more visible or well-known,³ considerably less research has been carried out on the work done among other local Christian communities.

Indeed, LFCs are delivering services and accompanying Venezuelans along migration routes, at border crossings and at migrants’ final destinations. LFCs have been providing temporary shelter and housing assistance,

food, clothing, transportation assistance, legal education and access to health services. They have also provided psychosocial assistance, worship space, and pastoral support. These local, neighborhood level, sometimes spontaneous and volunteer-driven faith-based initiatives, are complementary to the work done by specialized national and international NGOs and UN agencies.⁴

Findings suggested an opportunity to build connections across the infamous relief-development gap. While international NGOs and the UN continue to discuss the best ways to bridge immediate, life-saving humanitarian responses with longer-term initiatives that benefit both hosts and displaced persons, LFCs appear to be carrying out many humanitarian and development projects simultaneously.

The findings of this report tell a story of many LFCs that are highly engaged, and in some cases, acting very professionally. There are challenges, as well, including how sustainable such activities will be, and what types of protections should be in place among LFCs that are not connected to larger networks, donors, or accountability systems that require standard reporting and transparency. Broadly speaking, though, the LFCs interviewed for this report represent dedicated and innovative groups of people motivated by faith to do their best to respond to the protection and assistance needs of Venezuelans.

In the coming months and years, the ongoing pandemic, funding shortfalls, and an unpredictable political situation in Venezuela may limit how international actors can receive and respond to displaced Venezuelans. Many LFCs, as actors rooted in local communities, are positioned to reach both Venezuelan migrants and host community members in need.



INTRODUCTION

Background

As of June 2020, Venezuela ranks as the second-largest displacement crisis in the world, with an estimated 5.1 million Venezuelan refugees and migrants worldwide.⁵ The scale of displacement has been “unprecedented [...] in magnitude and speed” in Latin America,⁶ and will only be further complicated by the global Covid-19 pandemic.

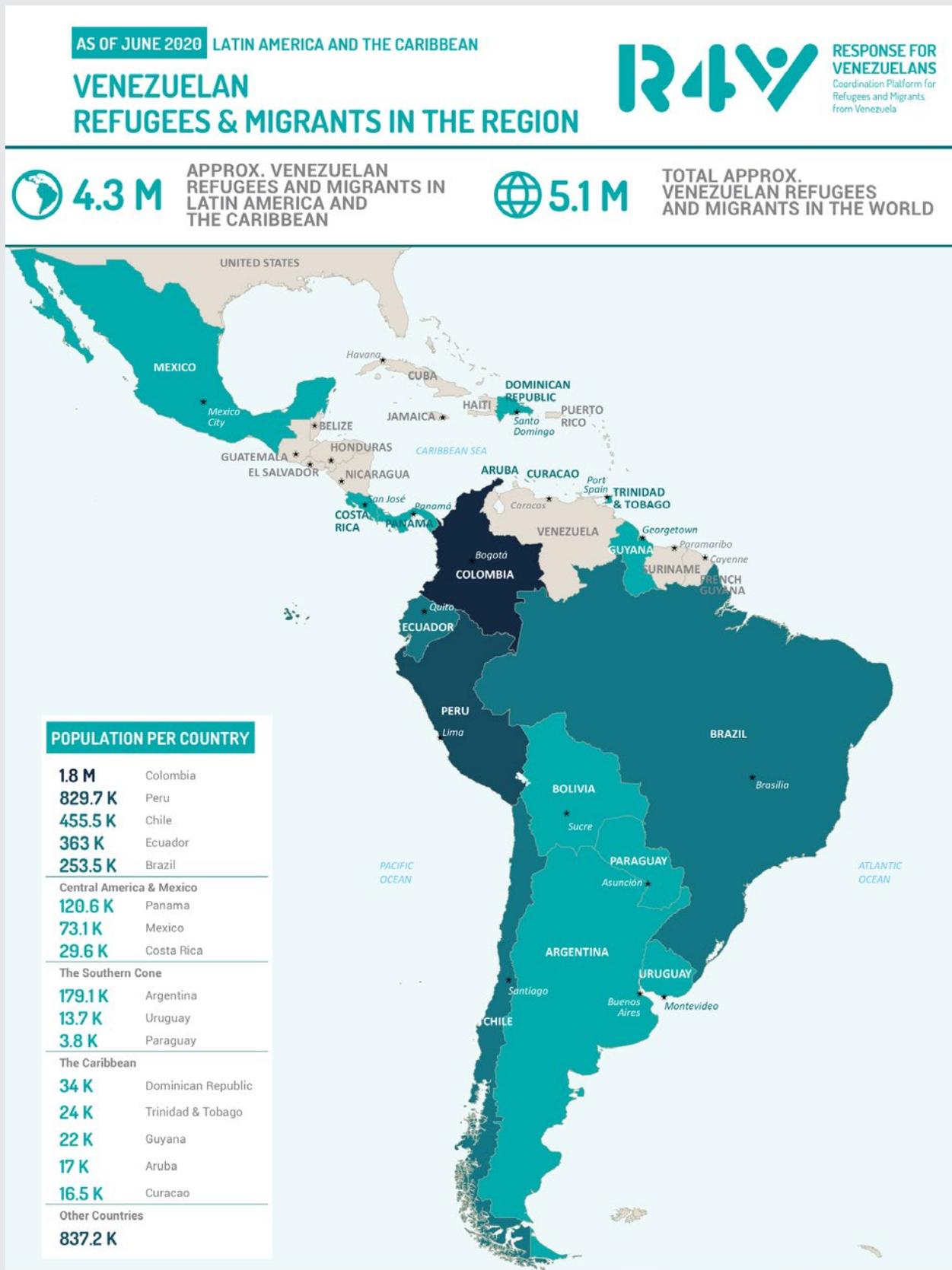
Once the wealthiest country in Latin America, Venezuela has seen its economy and political institutions collapse. Hyperinflation reached a shocking 10 million percent at the end of 2019, effectively rendering the currency worthless.⁷ A dramatic decline of social services and the failure of state institutions have also generated severe shortages of basic goods, including food, medicine, and vaccines, and political repression, rampant corruption, and widespread violence have created fear and desperation for many Venezuelans.

Even as Venezuelans continue to flee, millions more continue to suffer within Venezuela. The average Venezuelan has lost 11 kilograms (24 pounds),⁸ and around 90 percent of the population lives in poverty.⁹ Since March 2019, nationwide power outages have further limited social services and exacerbated the humanitarian situation in the country.¹⁰

More recently, the emergence of the coronavirus has further endangered Venezuelans. Already facing a broken health system plagued by shortages in supplies, staff, and means to stay open, hospitals and clinics are severely limited and an outbreak in Venezuela could be devastating to the population. At the same time, many Venezuelans who have fled to neighboring countries are now facing difficult choices as quarantines and lockdowns mean they cannot work, leaving them struggling to pay for housing, medicine and food. Reports indicate that some are choosing to return back to Venezuela, as they have no way to survive in their host countries.¹¹



Figure 1: UNHCR and IOM, R4V Map on Venezuelan Refugees and Migrants in the Region



The boundaries and names shown and the designations used in this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations. Creation date: June 2020. [More info.](#)



Overview of regional and international responses

The response to Venezuelan migration has been met with a strong regional response by neighboring states in the region. Countries like Colombia have shown relatively progressive policies toward Venezuelan migrants by allowing access to many basic services, rights and protections. Others, like Ecuador and Peru, have demonstrated shifts in policies toward Venezuelan migrants, as initially welcoming policies become more restrictive, including border closures and restrictions on migrants' access to social services and economic activity. New border closures due to COVID-19—including in Colombia, the busiest border with Venezuela—have also begun to limit where and how displaced Venezuelans flee.

The broader international community has shown a substantially lower commitment to the Venezuelan crisis, compared to other crises around the world, with UN appeals receiving only a fraction of financing needed from donors.¹² The UN and international aid groups have, however, created a regional response platform in collaboration with states and other key stakeholders. The Regional Inter-Agency Coordination Platform—co-led by UNHCR and IOM—was established in 2018 and aims to address the protection, assistance and integration needs of both refugees and migrants from Venezuela in affected Latin American and Caribbean states. Currently it has 41 participants, including 17 UN agencies, 15 NGOs, five donors, two international financial institutions and the Red Cross Movement.¹³ Recently a \$1.35 billion appeal was launched to meet the humanitarian needs of Venezuelan refugees and migrants in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Local faith communities (LFCs)

While much attention has been paid to UN and international NGO responses to Venezuelan displacement, considerably less is known about how local actors, and faith communities in particular, have reacted. Both Catholic and Protestant local faith communities (LFCs) have had a role in supporting Venezuelan migrants in certain countries. Indeed, it is often local groups that provide the first assistance to displaced persons in need.

This research has mapped and analyzed Protestant local faith community (LFC) responses to Venezuelan migrants and refugees in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Local faith communities have been used to describe a range of faith groups.¹⁴ In this study, they are defined as: formal and informal faith and worship communities, including informal and spontaneous groups mobilizing to provide basic services, deriving motivation from religious sources. They can also be faith networks or faith-influenced organizations with ties to the community.

Definition of LFC

LFC's are formal and informal faith and worship communities, including informal and spontaneous groups mobilizing to provide basic services, deriving motivation from religious sources. They can also be faith networks or faith-influenced organizations with ties to the community. The term "LFC" does not only refer to people gathering in a building for worship, but also those who gather in other spaces, sharing a religious—in this case Christian—motivation.



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This study sought first to identify the services provided, and second to offer analysis of how these LFCs responded, with the ultimate goal of informing future programming, advocacy and coalition-building, and improving the quality of support and services for Venezuelan migrants across the region. Although the work being done by Catholic Church groups is more visible (e.g. CARITAS, Scalabrinian, Jesuits),¹⁵ considerably less research has been carried out on the work done among other local Christian communities.

Indeed, LFCs are delivering services and accompanying Venezuelans along migration routes, at border crossings and at migrants’ final destinations. LFCs have been providing temporary shelter and housing assistance, food, clothing, transportation assistance, legal education and access to health services. They have also provided psychosocial assistance, worship space, and pastoral support. These local, neighborhood level, sometimes spontaneous and volunteer-driven faith-based initiatives, are complementary to the work done by specialized national and international NGOs and UN agencies.¹⁶

Literature underpinning the research

Research on localization, local faith communities and urban displacement suggests that LFCs’ efforts tend to rely heavily on volunteer work, and show a considerable capacity to mobilize local resources and connections. Often they are not part of or connected to the humanitarian sector response mechanisms, but have comparable advantages among other responders and stakeholders.¹⁷ As Elizabeth Ferris writes, “Long before international humanitarian law was formalized in treaty law, individuals and faith communities provided assistance to those afflicted by natural disaster, persecution, uprooting and war.”¹⁸ She identifies two facets that set faith-based groups apart from most other organizations: “..

“Long before international humanitarian law was formalized in treaty law, individuals and faith communities provided assistance to those afflicted by natural disaster, persecution, uprooting and war.”

they are motivated by their faith and they have a constituency which is broader than humanitarian concerns. For believers, to be a Jew or a Muslim or a Christian implies a duty to respond to the needs of the poor and the marginalized.”¹⁹ Other scholars like Michael Barnett and Janice Gross Stein recognize the powerful historical roots that humanitarian work has in religion, writing that it is only a slight exaggeration to say, “no religion, no humanitarianism.”²⁰

Work supported by CWS in Colombia near the Venezuelan border with migrants and local host communities²¹ demonstrates the importance of acknowledging, respecting and engaging existing host community leadership and structures, the need to identify LFCs serving Venezuelans on the move across the region, and the

benefits of supporting cross Colombia-Venezuelan initiatives. Better understanding the extent, role and approaches taken by LFCs is critical to assess the wide-range of activities supporting Venezuelan migrants, understand its dimensions, and propose future programming. This understanding offers opportunities to coordinate response efforts with a broader set of actors and identify potential ways to better address existing gaps and harness limited financial and non-financial resources. This research therefore seeks to address that gap in knowledge by examining the support provided to Venezuelan migrants by LFCs across the Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) region.



Objectives, scope, and methods

The research comprised of two main components: 1) mapping and 2) qualitative analysis. The countries selected for the study include: Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Curaçao, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Peru, and Trinidad. Case selection was based on a range of criteria, including the number of Venezuelans present in each country, known LFCs operating and responding to displaced persons, and accessibility. National consultants were hired to carry out the two pillars of the research. The consultants (five men and three women) had extensive familiarity with Protestant churches in their respective countries, prior research experience, and already boasted their own networks among LFCs.²² The mapping task, which took place between September 2019 and January 2020, required consultants to list as many LFCs as they could find that were responding to Venezuelans, and to record their contact information and activities. The qualitative analysis required consultants to carry out semi-structured interviews with LFC leaders and representatives, probing more deeply into how and why they were responding to Venezuelans they came into contact with.

The research faced some inherent limitations, including gender bias: most of the interviewees were, by default, men, as most church leadership in the region is male. This not only prevented consultants from hearing female perspectives, but also laypeople not in leadership positions. Future research may expend greater time and resources toward hearing from those in less powerful positions. In addition, the research was not designed to hear from Venezuelan migrants themselves; rather, it was focused on those responding. Hearing from Venezuelans in future projects may give a different sense of projects, priorities and experiences. Similarly, the nature of Venezuelan migration is diverse and complex, and does not lend itself to generalizations. Some migrants are in transit, others seek to settle in the communities examined in this study. Moreover, policies across countries vary widely, all of which can complicate comparing across cases. Finally, consultants were not able to access the full universe of cases, due to financial and temporal constraints.

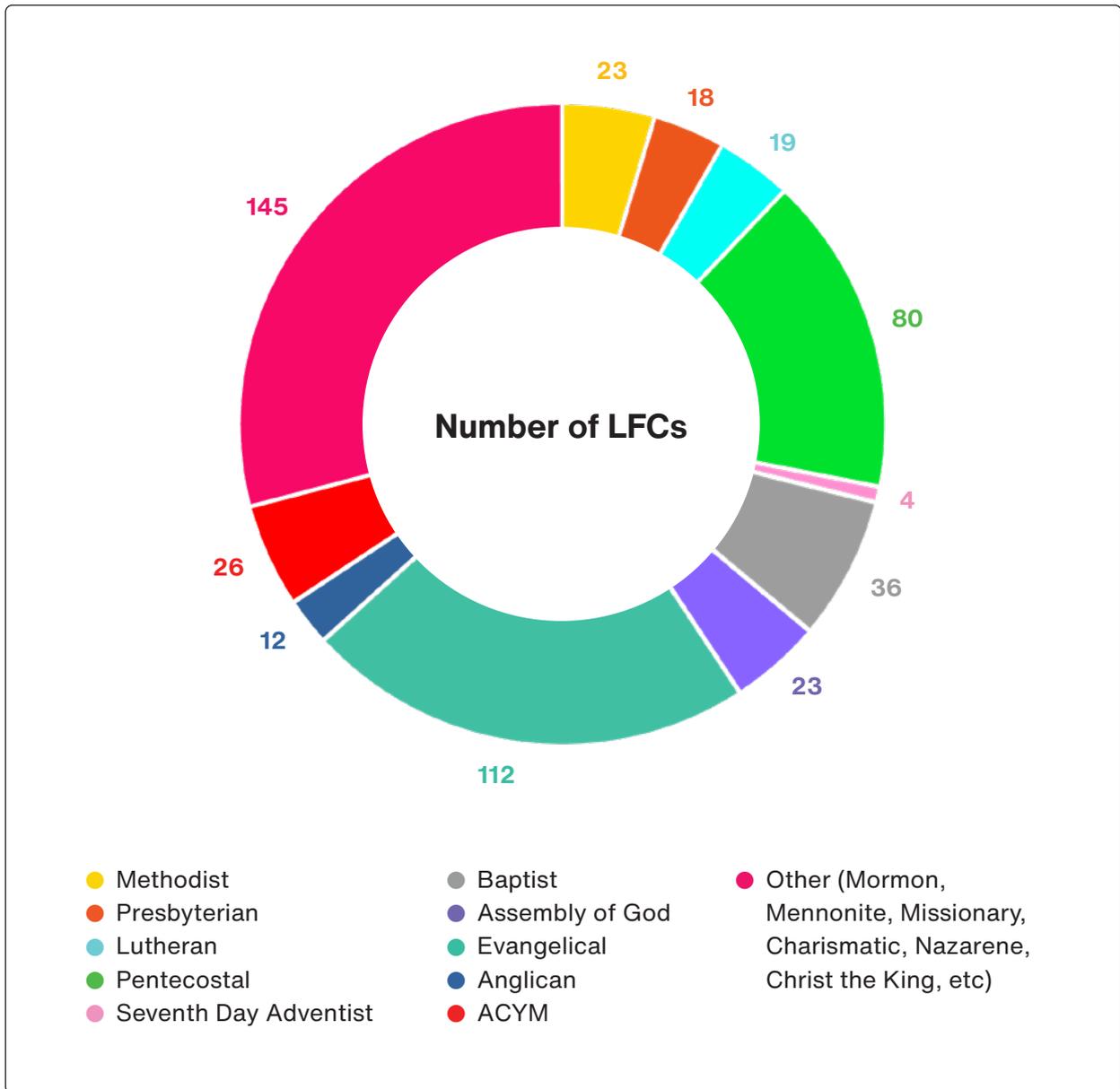
In spite of these limitations, nearly 500 LFCs were mapped. Approximately 20 percent of these LFCs would be considered mainline churches.²³ Qualitative interviews revealed a range of important themes and approaches, all of which are discussed in this report.

Figure 2: Countries and number of LFCs mapped (493 total)

Country	Number of LFCs mapped
Brazil	44
Chile	28
Colombia	172
Curaçao	19
Dominican Republic	45
Ecuador	132
Peru	21
Trinidad	32



Figure 3: Breakdown of LFCs mapped



The remainder of this report examines key contributions of LFCs responding to Venezuelans, and the traits of LFC responses, including how they differ from others providing assistance. It then considers challenges and analysis for areas for growth, and finally concludes with recommendations for future programming.



TRAITS OF LOCAL FAITH COMMUNITY RESPONSES: How do they differ from others providing assistance? What are some of the hallmarks of how they are assisting?

This section details some of the traits of LFC responses, including what makes their response efforts different from other types of relief actors. It includes analysis on the motivations underpinning their response, the type of funding they draw upon, the ways they can be agile and flexible in programming, the role of pastors/leaders of LFCs, and volunteerism within the LFC.

Motivations to assist

“Because I was hungry, and you fed me, I was thirsty, and you gave me a drink, I was a stranger and you received me”

— Matthew 25:35

Nearly all LFCs discussed their faith-based motivations behind assisting Venezuelan migrants. Some referred explicitly to the concept of *koinonia*, or *diakonia*, a Greek word that relates to helping people in need and caring for the poor and vulnerable. One pastor in Ecuador stated:

“To be a church in the community, to be agents of God, without distinction, for the love of neighbor. [We] have witnessed ... hardworking, professional people, trying not to be a burden, but looking for an opportunity to overcome.”

Another pastor in Guayaquil, Ecuador, said his church’s motivation came from “faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ and in the understanding of human rights...” Still others said the “...love of neighbor moves them,” and that they “see a mother’s vision and put themselves in the others’ shoes,” to try to understand and apply compassion to the circumstances of many Venezuelans.

The Presbyterian Church in Trinidad also sought to offer assist Venezuelan migrants. Reverend Joy Abdul-Mohan stated, “It is part of our responsibilities to seek out the lost, the oppressed, the exploited and marginalized ... They are human just like us. If there is one thing our faith stands for in Christ is that we must embrace all as humans.”²⁴ And the pastor of the La Familia missionary center in Santiago, Chile said that “without works, the heart of the church does not beat.”



Figure 4: The Methodist Church in Colombia

The Methodist Church in Colombia: “A Voice for the Voiceless”

The United Methodist Church Committee on Relief (UMCOR) funds the Methodist Church of Colombia to create multiple information-sharing community clubs for children. “A Voice for the Voiceless” centers, in eight locations across the country, share information online and in person about available services and government resources. It also assists pregnant women and women with infants needing maternal-child health services.

The church trains coordinators who organize response teams in each of the centers. Through home visits, the project offers accompaniment and support to migrant families.



The centers deliver basic-nutrient food packages to families. Methodist health brigades visit pregnant women, infants and children to offer medical care. The centers, through the children’s clubs and parents’ meetings, also help to integrate Venezuelan migrants into local communities.

Source: “Partners in relief for Venezuelan migrants,” written by Christie R. House, United Methodist Church Global Ministries, March 2020. [More info.](#)



A small number of others had more explicit ambitions of proselytization. Most, however, were more measured with the extent to which faith was a part of their activities, in some cases working with secular or other faith-based groups. In Peru, for example, the First Baptist Church in Lima met with Jewish, Mormon and other groups together with IOM. During these meetings, the pastor discussed how to prioritize housing, childcare and jobs in collaboration with these groups.

Funding

LFCs often have to think creatively to fund their assistance to Venezuelan migrants, as they are generally not the recipients of large international grants or donor states. The Apostolic Church Group of La Sabana in Colombia, for example, raises funds through a recycling project whereby families recycle milk boxes, egg cartons, soda bottles, and bags at recycling centers and contribute the funds to support projects. Others offset costs for assisting migrants by tapping into local resources, networks and teams of volunteers for everything from nursing to hairdressing and construction. Funding sometimes came from congregational giving, and occasionally social media campaigns amongst church contacts.

Agility and flexibility: the ability to adapt and alter programs and activities with flexibility as needed

In many cases, LFCs demonstrated agility that other organizations responding, including large international NGOs and the United Nations, are not always able to do. Indeed, LFCs, by nature of being at the grassroots level, are instantly connected to the local community and have fewer donors and authorities to report to, meaning they can change course when an activity does not appear to be working.

The Iglesia Cristiana Ministerio Verdad y Vida in Medellin, Colombia responds based on need, rather than running specific projects. The pastor described responding to two migrants who arrived and were very sick, providing them with clothes, medicine and money for the clinic. A doctor who volunteers with the congregation also provided some free medical care. The same congregation also helps to purchase bus tickets for migrants going onward in their journeys.

In Guayaquil, Ecuador, church volunteers from Los Esteros Baptist Church began their work in the land terminal of Guayaquil carrying non-perishable and perishable food. Chaplains undertook a medical and outpatient campaign to hydrate people and then refer people to shelters provisionally installed at the time. Some in the church also hosted migrants in their own homes. The Hand of God Church, an independent congregation in Citadel, Ecuador, also accompanies Venezuelan migrants at the bus terminal in Guayaquil, and provides them shelter through “A Roof for the Road” albergue, as well as cleaning kits, non-perishable foods and other donations.

In Chile, LFCs also had to be agile and flexible in their response, as the Venezuelans arriving have shifted from individual men to entire families, including larger numbers of vulnerable groups, such as breastfeeding mothers, elderly, sick and small children. LFCs in Ecuador have also been able to respond to the changing needs of Venezuelan migrants. The Soul Clinic near Trinipuerto, for



example, was able to assist with the burial expenses of a Venezuelan who had passed away.

While they did not tend to have accountability standards and monitoring mechanisms akin to international standards, many LFC responses indicated some level of care standards, and ability (or at least intentions) to hold themselves accountable for delivering care against these standards. This could provide a starting point for LFCs to partner with more other institutional partners, in ways that allow for basic monitoring of minimum standards.

Iglesia Episcopal Anglicana, Colombia



Role of pastors/networking

Venezuelan migrants face a range of risks while fleeing and upon settling in a new host community. Trust, therefore, is critical to actors seeking to respond. In many cases, the church and its leadership are seen as more trustworthy by migrants. Indeed, Venezuelan migrants also expressed trust and familiarity with the church as an actor assisting them. According to Pugh, Jimenez and Latuff, some 43 percent of Venezuelan migrants reported “a lot” of trust in the church.”²⁵ This compares to less familiarity with UN and other relief actors, and points to the important role that LFCs can have in responding to displacement.

In a similar vein, pastors felt a personal conviction to care for Venezuelan migrants. In addition to their faith-based convictions, they recognized that their leadership was essential to guiding their congregations.

Volunteerism

LFC responses to Venezuelan migrants were marked by extensive volunteerism from congregation members. Most had little to no money budgeted, and relied on congregation members to carry out programs and activities as volunteers. The Grupo Iglesia Centro Misionero Bethesda in Bogotá, Colombia, for example, relied on volunteers to distribute food, medicine, blankets, mattresses, and clothes. The pastor stated:

“We ... integrate children in church activities and advise families so they can link children to schools and [activities] for children. We finance ourselves with the church’s own resources, carrying out activities to obtain funds, with the help of the assistants. We act in alliances with other churches such as those of Pastor Héctor in Fuquene, we have managed to locate many people in work, in Simijaca many have settled, because there are several jobs, we have a psalmist and two Venezuelan pastors who are currently doing a great job.”

Seventh Day Adventist churches in Colombia even have volunteers who use sign language to reach Venezuelan migrants with hearing impairments.

The Second IPI de Maringá in Brazil hosted a workshop on how to receive Venezuelan migrants, including conversations with other churches and networking on how best to receive migrants. It is also working with university leaders to seek out opportunities for Venezuelan migrants to study.

Similarly, the pastor of La Victoria Church in Ecuador noted that the first Venezuelan family they assisted was found on the street by a congregation member. From there, the church’s volunteering assistance snowballed: “The real practice of the good news...is not only spiritual but ... mission. It began with the initiative of a lawyer, who brought all the news and was the bearer of the needs of Venezuelans. From there a campaign began to prepare tuna sandwiches, which were transferred to the land [arrivals] terminal, where there were a large number of [Venezuelans].”



In Chile's Pentecostal Liberation Church in Santiago, members helped with everything from nursing to hairdressing. And Providence Mission, a Lutheran church (Missouri Synod) in Santiago, Chile, is comprised of mainly Venezuelan migrants (some 65 of the 70 members are from Venezuela) and therefore is a place where Venezuelans can meet their spiritual needs in community. There are also a few rooms for those in transit, as well as connections to legal assistance and labor networks. When American pastors visit, English classes are held. This church is notable because it is comprised of Venezuelans volunteers helping newly arriving Venezuelans.



KEY CONTRIBUTIONS MADE BY LOCAL FAITH COMMUNITIES RESPONDING TO VENEZUELAN

This section details the key contributions made by LFCs in response to Venezuelan migration. This includes analysis of LFC material contributions, as well as contributions to Venezuelan livelihoods, education, language and vocational training, access to health services, legal assistance, and other forms of assistance. It also includes analysis on integration, social cohesion and psychosocial programming.

Distribution of material items

Nearly all LFCs provided some form of material assistance to Venezuelan migrants. LFCs across Colombia, for example, provided a range of donations, including food, clothing, toiletry and hygiene items, as well as furniture and other equipment such as stoves, refrigerators, beds, mattresses, and other household appliances.

The Iglesia Cristiana Ministerio Verdad y Vida in Colombia served daily lunches in collaboration with the University of Antioquia, and provided “love baskets” to low-income families and Venezuelans alike. Similarly, Seventh Day Adventist churches in Colombia provide food assistance— “hot food dining rooms”—in a number of cities, including Cúcuta, Arauca, Saravena, Bucaramanga, Medellín, Santa Marta, and Maicao. They reach hundreds of Venezuelans and needy Colombians on a daily basis. They also provide clothing, particularly to migrants in transit, as well as hydration kits, and hygiene items. The SDA churches also provide “kitchen kits,” which included pots, pans, spoons and other kitchen items. Each of these kits is distributed in a way that is intended to give greater choice to the migrants: they are permitted to choose which items are most important to them, rather than receiving a pre-made bundle. Methodist, Evangelical and Presbyterian churches in Trinidad also provided migrants with donations from the community.

Solid Rock Open Bible Church, Trinidad



Iglesia Episcopal Anglicana, Colombia

Methodist churches in Brazil have also created programs to assist Venezuelans with clothes and food items (e.g. Igreja Metodista Brasil). And Baptist churches in Brazil have mobilized networks to provide food, clothing and other supplies to Venezuelan migrants.

Language training and assistance

In countries where Spanish is not the primary language, including Trinidad, Brazil and Curaçao, LFCs provide language training as an important part of integration and social cohesion. In Brazil, for example, many LFCs reported offering language assistance in the form of translation and Portuguese classes for Venezuelans. Similarly, in Trinidad, where English is the primary language spoken, Venezuelans who speak only Spanish are heavily disadvantaged. Thus, the provision of language training is essential for survival in these host states.



English classes (Joy Abdul Mohan), Presbyterian Church, Trinidad



Churches in Trinidad also started offering services in Spanish for Venezuelan migrants. Many have limited resources, but try to project translated hymns and scripture onto screens during worship, or to encourage Venezuelan clergy who have fled to Trinidad to lead worship.

Solid Rock Open Bible Church, Trinidad (service in Spanish for Venezuelans)



Education and childcare

LFCs interviewed across the countries examined emphasized the need to focus on children, including educational opportunities, childcare, and other child protection activities. While education policies across the case study countries vary, nearly all saw Venezuelan families struggling to obtain quality childcare and education for their children.

In Trinidad, interviewees reported many Venezuelan migrants have to leave children—some just toddlers—alone during long stretches of the day while they go to work, often in the informal economy. Those who did not want to leave their children unattended struggled to find work, and were unable to support themselves. Many parents with small children are thus hit the hardest, as they did not want to leave their children and did not trust others to watch them.

Many LFCs reported being a natural fit to assist in this situation. Because trust is often higher in churches, some migrants are more comfortable leaving their children in the care of church volunteers than other groups. At the same time, church facilities are not always equipped to provide adequate



education and daycare facilities. Nonetheless, in many cases, it was the only option many migrants had to leave their children and earn money to support their families.

The Apostolic Church Group of La Sabana in Colombia provides childcare, including English classes, and music, sports, arts, and other activities during school breaks.

Iglesia Vino Nuevo, Santa Marta, Colombia



Health

Assisting Venezuelan migrants in accessing health care was a common response of many LFCs interviewed. This included basic care, including offering nutrition and first aid, to referrals to hospitals, payment of bills, and drawing on congregation members with medical expertise to offer free exams. Methodist churches in Brazil hosted clinics and health campaigns, as well as focusing specifically on pregnant women. Similarly, a Seventh Day Adventist church in Colombia provided primary health care to migrants in Bucaramanga and Medellín. Medical consultations took place in Bucaramanga in the Adventist medical unit and in Medellín in the Adventist University IPS. Migrants could receive free medicine, first level laboratories, and transportation assistance so they could travel to meet their medical appointment.

LFCs in Colombia used volunteers to host clinics for Venezuelan migrants that encompass a range of health and psychosocial needs and specialties, including dentistry, pediatrics, gynecology, neurology, as well as nutrition and dietetics. They also provided psychosocial care “events,” reaching some 700 migrants in Bucaramanga.



Housing

Affordable, available quality housing was universally mentioned among LFC interviewees as a top priority for Venezuelan migrants. In some cases, LFCs assisted directly with rent. For example, Proyecto SWAN by ADRA in Brazil offers three months of rent support to Venezuelan families. It also helps run an assistance center for refugees, which helps Venezuelans with documentation, medical assistance, food, translation and other needs.

In other cases, LFCs utilized whatever shelter they had available, whether it was the worship space itself, housing for the clergy, other parts of the church building or campus, homes of parishioners, or housing found through church member connections.

In still other cases, LFCs created their own shelters with migrants, either on their own or in partnership with other organizations. In Peru, the Methodist Church runs Hope House, a shelter for Venezuelan migrant families. Initially, the space was only used for pastors and leaders in the church visiting Lima. However, the church, responding to the needs of Venezuelan migrants, converted the space into a shelter:

“one, two, three, four families arrived. And we had children running everywhere...and all our logic of our operation was changing. We have a kitchen to prepare food, toys, clothes, cleaning supplies...Families often come with only a backpack as luggage. We have no budget for this.”

In many cases, these shelters provided other services, too. The Asociacion Evangelica Misionera Amazonas in Brazil, for example, runs a shelter that provides refuge for some 300 migrants, including food, clothing, job training and preparation for travel into the rest of Brazil.

Venezuelan migrants walking in Colombia, 2018²⁶



Figure 5: The Methodist Church of Peru

The Methodist Church of Peru: House of Hope

The Miramar Methodist Church in the San Miguel District of Lima runs the “House of Hope” shelter, which hosts migrants, many of whom are children or pregnant women. The church built the shelter with the help of UMCOR funding, and provides a food basket and refers clients for medical care.

“The arrival of our brothers and sisters from Venezuela is an opportunity provided by God for us to manifest God’s love in our neighbor,” said its director, Carmen Mollo Gutiérrez.

“They are teaching us the deep meaning of taking a leap of faith, as they have done. Casa de la Esperanza is not only a place of accommodation and supportive solidarity, it is also a space of human coexistence, where bonds of friendship flourish.”

Source: “Partners in relief for Venezuelan migrants,” written by Christie House, UMCOR, March 2020. [More info.](#)





Livelihoods

Among the most commonly cited priorities for LFCs working with Venezuelans was the need to help Venezuelans find income-generating activities and access livelihoods. In Medellin, Colombia, the Iglesia Rey de Paz recognized the skill sets migrants had, and subsequently created an organic insecticide product and business, which is intended to grow into livelihood opportunities for other migrants, as well. Other interviewees in Colombia cited weekly entrepreneurship workshops for Venezuelan migrants, including balloon-decorating, fruit decorating, and the selling of baked goods. The Victoria Church in Ecuador had Venezuelan migrants help repair air conditioners in the church as a source of income.

The Apostolic Church Group of La Sabana in Colombia also focuses specifically on income-generating activities for women, holding entrepreneurship classes on crafts, ceramics, trapillo knitting and other activities intended to help women generate resources from home without having to leave their children. The church then helps hold a sale for these women to sell their items, and also to acquire furniture, clothes, shoes, toys, blankets and other items at a reduced cost. There is also a garden where they have planted fruits such as tomatoes, cape gooseberries, and blackberries, which they



sell to collect funds for snacks for children. Another church in Colombia, the Anglican Episcopal Church Group, has collaborated with others to help undocumented Venezuelans make brooms and rags to work informally in order to support themselves as cleaners.

Most LFCs, however, had few formal resources in place to assist migrants in finding jobs. Instead, they drew upon their networks whenever possible, trying to help migrants find work in the community on an ad hoc basis.

Integration, spirituality and social cohesion

Local faith communities are uniquely positioned to contribute to the integration and social cohesion of Venezuelan migrants. Indeed, pastors and church members highlighted a range of ways that LFCs contributed to the integration of Venezuelan migrants in their communities. Not surprisingly greater levels of integration were more likely among churches working with Venezuelans who were settling, rather than passing through in transit. The First Baptist Church in Lima, Peru, for example, held regular meetings with Venezuelan migrants in its shelters. The pastor noted, “...we interact, they share their week, their successes, their failures, their sorrows, their joys and everything that is happening in their life.”

Many LFCs sought to provide a welcoming tone, as well as physical and emotional space for arriving Venezuelan migrants. Other LFCs discussed their outreach to Venezuelan migrants in terms of a “spirit of solidarity.” The pastor of the Shalom Cristian Community in Antioquia, Colombia stated:

“The opportunity to serve this population has been very rewarding and not necessarily because they end up [coming to] our church, but for the opportunity to attend and see how important it is for people to receive our help. I think it is a way to embody the love of God.”

LFCs also provided the opportunity for Venezuelans to continue to celebrate their own culture and customs, which in turn provided an opportunity for the host community to appreciate Venezuelan customs, as well. In Ecuador, for example, a church arranged a large Venezuelan Christmas event, with “...a typical Venezuelan dinner (with songs, food and other peculiarities of the northern country) attended by an average of 100 people living in the surrounding area of Mapsingue ... they distributed gifts to 100 Venezuelan children settled in Guayaquil. They also have four families joining the congregation.” In Brazil, the Paróquia de Ressurreição, Catedral da Igreja Episcopal Anglicana provided cultural programming for Venezuelan migrants as a way for them to share and exchange their culture with the local cultural practices with the community.

Other churches in Ecuador described an “adaptation process” for Venezuelans—one that was not always easy. During this time, migrants may begin to feel part of the host congregation, “belonging to a new family” and integrating into church programs, but not necessarily part of the wider community. Pastors in Ecuador also recognized the important role of churches as a vehicle for integration and a tool to fight xenophobia. Indeed, Ecuador has seen tensions and xenophobic acts toward Venezuelan migrants in recent years, including attacks, robberies, discrimination and other crimes.²⁷



Similarly, an interviewee of the Jucum Group in Colombia discussed ways of building connections with Venezuelan migrants:

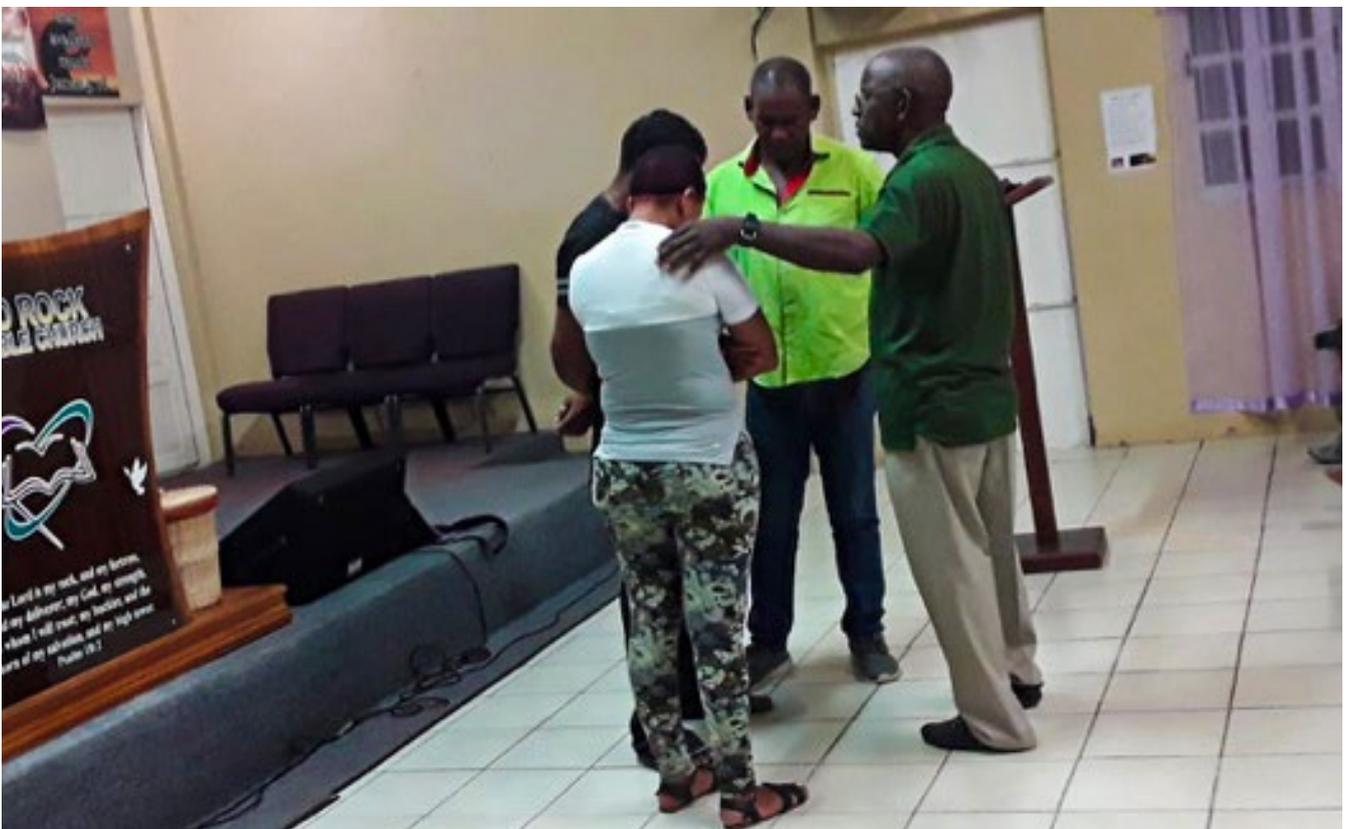
“As a success....the migrants [felt] listened to because they feel that someone cares.... We see many testimonies of how the discipleship given to them has prevented them resorting to crime or making bad decisions. In a meeting we decorated with things from Venezuela—the flag, music—and many broke down [crying], but that gave them a lot of encouragement to move forward. There are already some who are doing well, we have made new friends.”

Participation of Venezuelan migrants

Many LFCs work hard to promote Venezuelan participation and leadership in the design and execution of programs and activities. In Colombia’s Anglican Episcopal Church Group, an interviewee stated that Venezuelans initially simply received food and hygiene kits (paper, talc, toothbrush, toothpaste, deodorant, soap, cures, shampoo). In time, however, Venezuelans started to participate in worship, and eventually started a service of their own.

In Trinidad, some LFCs invited Venezuelans to hold their own Spanish-language service for Venezuelans, in some cases having Venezuelan clergy or Spanish-speaking Trinidadian clergy leading services.

Solid Rock Open Bible Church, Trinidad



CONCLUSION: ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This report has presented the findings from in-depth mapping and interviewing of LFC group members' responses to Venezuelan migrants in Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Curaçao, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Peru, and Trinidad. It has examined the key ways that LFCs are responding, including their funding, agility and flexibility in programming, the role of pastors, volunteerism and motivations to assist. It then examined some of the key contributions made by LFCs, including the distribution of material items, language training, education and childcare, health, housing, and livelihoods.

Analysis

The traits and contributions discussed above can be unpacked under a range of themes. Most notably, the motivations of LFCs to get involved speak to their character—their approach to faith and ministry—but also their place in the community. Many of these LFCs were not large, wealthy churches, but rather small groups of motivated individuals answering what they felt was a spiritual call to serve. While some were in close proximity to border areas, many were on the outskirts of cities where Venezuelans were drawn to. This illustrates a level of commitment beyond the border areas.

The data collected also demonstrate a unique opportunity to build connections across the infamous relief-development gap. While international NGOs and the UN continue to discuss the best ways to bridge immediate, life-saving humanitarian responses with longer-term initiatives that benefit both hosts and displaced persons, LFCs appear to be carrying out many humanitarian and development projects simultaneously. For example, a small LFC may provide food and shelter to a *caminante*, but may also connect them with employment opportunities in the local community, or transform a church building into a community center or child care space that benefits locals and migrants alike.

Similarly, this capability points to potential in assisting the integration of migrants: many LFCs reported close bonds developing between members of the congregation and Venezuelans. Other locals participating in the LFC felt a sense of ownership toward those they were assisting. This varied depending on the nature of the migrant's mobility (i.e. if they were simply stopping for a few nights before traveling onward, versus rooting themselves in a community with plans to stay indefinitely).

There are questions about the sustainability of LFC assistance to migrants. As noted above, most did not have funding beyond their own local congregation, and few would meet the necessary criteria to receive funding from large international organizations. The most sustainable models are those that receive denominational funding from national or international ministries. LFCs like those connected to UMCOR, for example, are able to develop programs over time, rather than on an ad hoc basis. The key will be maintaining the flexibility that allows LFCs to respond well, while also building in the accountability, transparency and safeguards expected among professional humanitarian actors.

LFC responses to Venezuelan migrants and other humanitarian situation more broadly provide a range of areas for further research, including additional LAC countries that the study was not able to reach, as well as further investigation into the ways technology is being used or could be used to facilitate protection and assistance to displaced Venezuelans (e.g. WhatsApp groups, Facebook etc.).



Recommendations

Where possible, local faith communities should:

- ✓ **Ensure that programming reflects the fluidity and dynamic nature of the migrants.** Where migrants are simply passing through rural areas or in transit to other destinations and urban areas, LFCs should focus on immediate needs like food, shelter, hygiene items and facilities, and access to charging stations/internet access/phones to call loved ones.
- ✓ **Design programs that maximize Venezuelan migrant participation in design, planning, execution and monitoring.** This could include, as seen in this study, Venezuelans leading their own Spanish-language worship and having leadership roles in how aid is distributed, shelters designed and run, and information shared.
- ✓ **Prioritize programs that emphasize education and safe childcare options, improving facilities to meet basic standards where possible.²⁸**
- ✓ **Take specific steps that minimize risks to migrants being exploited or abused.** This may include consulting guidelines from international protection actors like UNHCR, UNICEF, IOM, or NGOs specializing in migration like CWS, IRC, HIAS, JRS, or Asylum Access.²⁹
- ✓ **Avoid proselytization, and never link humanitarian assistance to migrants' beliefs, per global standards and norms in humanitarian assistance.** LFCs working with Venezuelans should not require religious confessions or participation in worship to the provision of assistance.
- ✓ **Seek to include vulnerable groups in design, implementation and monitoring of activities, as well as decision-making.** This includes women, elderly, disabled, LGBTQI and other minorities.
- ✓ **Where possible, enhance psychosocial programs that promote inclusion and relationships with host communities,** facilitating partnership and interaction, and highlighting the contributions that migrants can make to local communities.
- ✓ **Connect with national, regional and international groups—faith-based and otherwise—as well as ecumenical partners** to create a stronger network of migrant support, and to learn from one another.



To regional and international actors:

✓ **Recommendations on coordination, communication and connectivity:**

- LFCs should have modes of communication with other aid actors, including faith groups like the Catholic Church, but also the UN (UNHCR, IOM, UNICEF, UNDP, UNWomen etc.) and NGOs (Mercy Corps, IRC, Asylum Access etc.).
- LFCs should be connected via email/WhatsApp to share best practices and improve connectivity amongst grassroots actors.
- LFCs and other branches of the faith community should serve as points of information for migrants. Even if resources are limited, some LFCs could have contact information (brochures etc.) of relevant information for migrants, including asylum policies, rules and regulations. They could also have information on how to connect with UNHCR and other aid groups, and other sources of information, including where else to obtain aid.

✓ **Recognize LFCs as a unique actor.** They should be seen as uniquely capable to meet some needs of migrants, as outlined in this report. At the same time, they should not be seen as equivalent to other aid actors, or as a substitute for the international aid community, including large international NGOs who have professional staff, different funding and accountability mechanisms.

✓ **Consider ways to offer funding to activities carried out by LFCs.** In light of the COVID-19 pandemic and increasing efforts to work with local partners, international actors should seek to build partnerships and fund LFC work.



APPENDIX A: CONSULTANT BIOGRAPHIES

Luz Stella Colmenares Galvis, is a Social Communicator and Pastor at the Dialogues and Faith Church in Bogotá. She works as a Reporter for the Network of Colombian-Venezuelan Citizen Reporters, “Entre parceros y panas.”

Kelvin Cuevas, has degrees in Law and International Relations, and Commercial Diplomacy. He was the Director of International Relations at the UNEV National Evangelical University, and conducts research on Africa and the Middle East. He is currently working on Asia and Oceania issues at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Dominican Republic.

Juan Darío Castaño is a theologian from the Santo Tomás University in Bogotá, Colombia. He is also pastor of the Community of Faith New Life Church of the Assemblies of God, and through it he has created and encouraged different initiatives in support of Venezuelan migrants.

Sarah Miller is a Senior Fellow at Refugees International and faculty at the University of London and Georgetown University. She has worked, researched, and written about refugees and other displaced groups in Latin America, the Middle East, and Africa. She has worked with many Christian organizations, including the World Council of Churches and the Lutheran World Federation. She is a member of the Presbyterian Church, USA.

Carmen Mollo Gutiérrez, graduated in Social Sciences and holds a Master’s Degree in Sociology, Diploma in Governance and Political Management from the Pontificia Universidad Católica of Perú. She is the head of the Area of Ecumenical and Interreligious Relations of the Methodist Church of Peru, and Coordinator

of “House of Hope for Venezuelan Migrant Families (a project of Peru’s Methodist church).

Cristian Muñoz Roa studied History, and belongs to the Evangelical Lutheran Church IELCH of Chile. He is mainly dedicated to formation issues, and to diakonal projects of his church. He firmly believes that “the Kingdom of God happens in each gesture towards those who need it most.”

Erick Pérez Ortuño is trained in theology, and is a missionary of the 2nd IPI of Maringá and President of the Sendas Institute. He is currently researching migration, challenges facing immigrants, and the reception of international migrants through the evangelical churches in Brazil. This work also focuses on advocacy for the reception of Venezuelans in the state of Paraná-Brazil, and supports actions for churches and communities of faith that do humanitarian work with Venezuelans.

Sandra Patricia Valbuena Torres is a psychologist with an emphasis in community affairs, specialist in autonomous learning pedagogy, and a specialist in occupational health and safety. She has worked with ICBF with children and adolescents, in reestablishing rights, with vulnerable population in programs of families with well-being and in investigative processes with migrant populations. She is part of the Life Center Church of the Assemblies of God.

José Vincés is a lawyer and magister in human rights, pastor, member and coordinator of some networks for the protection and defense of violated women, abused children, and families in the context of human mobility. He is the Executive Director of the Paz y Esperanza Ecuador Foundation.



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- ⁴ Like the Scalabrinian and JRS/SJR in the Catholic church; CAREF (Argentina), FASIC (Chile) and SEDHU (Uruguay) in the mainline Protestant churches; ADRA, HIAS, CARE and World Vision.
The support from local faith communities is not limited to Venezuelans; there are similar examples of support to Central American migrants throughout the region.
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