



An alliance mobilising Christian communities in favour of migrants

Fuller Theological Seminary and Tearfund have created an innovative diploma to help the church in Latin America and the Caribbean to respond effectively and compassionately to the realities of human mobility.

tearfund

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📷 Front cover photo: Migrants from Venezuela must travel through tough terrain to reach Colombia. Ferley Ospina/Tearfund

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Migration in Latin America

Why do people choose to migrate if it means facing dangerous roads, insecure borders, exploitation of all kinds, and possible deportation? In most cases, it is to save the lives of themselves and their families or to have better opportunities.

In recent years, millions of people across Latin America have been forced to abandon their homes due to political, economic, and social turmoil in their countries. These circumstances are compounded by natural disasters and the health crisis caused by Covid-19. As they arrive in neighbouring countries, many migrants face discrimination, racism, and abuse.

The waves of xenophobia and discrimination in several Latin American countries have not only been perpetuated by the political space or by sectors of civil society, but unfortunately have also been perpetuated by some ecclesiastical sectors.

But, as reports such as [How Immigrants Contribute to Developing Countries' Economies](#) conclude, immigrants can positively impact key components of the economy of welcoming countries.

The church's response to migration in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC)

In 2019 in the LAC region, Tearfund founded the campaign, [Como nacido entre nosotros](#) ('As born among us'). It takes its name from God's call in Leviticus 19:33-34 for foreigners to be treated as native-born, and encourages churches to welcome migrants and provide them with comprehensive support. Part of the project included [the development of an Android app](#) to provide practical and spiritual support to migrants in Latin America.

Given the waves of xenophobia and discrimination that migrants have experienced in the LAC region, we have been glad to witness more than 300 Christian churches and organisations across Latin America participating in the campaign and responding to the call to love our migrant neighbours as if they were born in our families and countries. These churches have understood the concept of mission, helping migrants and refugees by providing humanitarian support, defending their rights, offering psycho-spiritual support, and helping migrants integrate into the communities they arrive in. They have also acted together to advocate

for authorities to approve and implement new practices and laws that will improve the legal status and rights of migrants in destination countries.

An opportunity to serve migrants more effectively

In our work with churches and Christian organisations, we saw the need and importance to build on this passion and commitment and equip the church with an even greater professionalism and technical tools so it can increasingly serve migrants in sensitive, informed and responsible ways.

We realised that the biggest areas of need were to:

- Raise awareness of the realities migrants face.
- Provide better biblical and theological support for what the church is doing.
- Help people to visualise what good practice looks like when serving migrants.
- Guide people on incorporating public advocacy as part of their mission in supporting migrants.
- Promote joint work through exchanges and alliances between churches and Christian organisations working with migrants.

‘When we launched the “As born among us” campaign, we had the intuition to organise a training programme that was interdisciplinary, comprehensive, regional and which sought to respond to all dimensions of the human person – especially as no such programme existed in Latin America and the Caribbean. This intuition was confirmed when we met Christian leaders from South America who work with people in human mobility in February 2020, just before the pandemic, and from that moment the first conversations began.’

María Alejandra Andrade, Theology and Network Engagement Global Lead, Tearfund

Creating an alliance in favour of migrants

Fuller Theological Seminary (USA) and Tearfund in the Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) are both convinced that God is with the migrant, the stranger and the foreigner, so we came together to strengthen the testimony of the church in its response to the migration crisis in LAC and respond to those who see migrants as threats instead of a blessing.

Fuller Theological Seminary is an established, evangelical, multi-denominational graduate institution in the USA, committed to forming global leaders for kingdom vocations. For the past 70 years, it has taught more than 4,000 students, who have come from 70 countries and 100 denominations. While Fuller already had a diploma about migration, it was taught in English and targeted a US audience. Fuller recognised that Tearfund had extensive experience in contextual, practical and catalytic work, and through the experience of promoting the *As born among us* campaign had developed more than 70 allies in the LAC region.

So together we created a higher diploma, [*The Church's Response to the Human Mobility Crisis in Latin America and the Caribbean*](#), for those churches, local ministries, and Christian organisations in the LAC region who have already reflected theologically and designed mobilisation strategies. The diploma will train participants from these groups to be able to respond more effectively to the realities of human mobility: the internal or international movement of people, whether voluntary or forced.

A sign of hope in the midst of a crisis

The six-month diploma encourages integral mission as a missiological and pastoral option. Currently, Fuller has enrolled more than 180 students on the course, from 15 LAC countries. These leaders of Christian churches, who support migrants and refugees, make up a learning community that is exploring the theological, socio-human, psycho-spiritual, legal, humanitarian and advocacy dimensions of migration.

'The diploma is a sign of hope in the midst of the worst migration crisis in Latin America. When we see 180 students in the first cohort and know that this number will grow, it is a sign of hope that the Holy Spirit is stimulating the response of the love of Christ and the power of Christ in this time of need.'

Dr. Alexia Salvatierra, Dean of the Fuller Theological Seminary - Latin Center, USA

This is a huge achievement for Tearfund's LAC regional team. Tearfund staff – Loida Carriel, Richard Serrano and Maria Andrade – are teaching three of the diploma's six modules. The course is also completely online to meet the current contextual realities due to Covid-19, and while currently available in Spanish, the diploma will soon expand to include instruction in Portuguese for students from Brazil.

In addition, Tearfund is not only providing technical expertise to teach the diploma's students. Because the cost of tuition for many church leaders in LAC would be prohibitively expensive, we are covering the entire cost of tuition for all students taking this diploma.

Reflecting on the journey so far

Almost three years ago, the LAC regional team decided to respond to the dire needs of our region, and migration was one of them. Getting to this point has truly been a joint effort between the various Tearfund advisors in the LAC region, working together to find a solution to a regional need, and we have no doubt that this internal collaboration was the essential element in achieving this alliance with Fuller. Looking back, we recognise that God has guided us on this path of accompanying the church in Latin America to sensitise, mobilise and influence it in favour of migrants and refugees.

Although the programme has only just begun, we have already made some rich observations:

- **While in general the church in LAC is dedicated to act in favour of migrants, it has not always had the necessary training to do so effectively.** Experience has shown us that human mobility in LAC has common and distinctive elements. This poses challenges and opportunities that merit multidisciplinary and intentional study. The good intentions of the faith communities to respond to this problem are an encouraging first step, but training is also necessary to better understand this phenomenon from sociological, humanitarian, biblical and theological perspectives.
- **More institutions have been increasing their training offers, but they don't always respond to the interests and demands of local churches.** This diploma has been designed specifically to fill this need, and the high uptake has confirmed to us the importance of adapting training offers to meet the specific needs of churches in the LAC region: in this case, for training with a focus on human mobility.

'The diploma is deeply objective and provides tools to equip the church in Latin America and the Caribbean regarding the work with human mobility. That means it has a lot of biblical theological content to sensitise and to serve as tools for participants in working with migrants.'

Pastor Francisco Mosquera Angulo, coordinator of the *Table of Human Mobility*, pastor of the *Iglesia Hermanos Menonita* and diploma student and group facilitator, Cali, Colombia

- **Most churches and Christian ministries do not have the resources to undertake training at this level.** The alliance between Tearfund and Fuller Theological Seminary has provided an opportunity for these local churches to access high quality training, so that they can continue their learning and share their experiences and resources.
- **The alliance between Fuller and Tearfund was made possible thanks to existing networks and joint connections that allowed us to find each other.** Recognising the strengths, challenges and scope of each organisation has also been vital to making this alliance work.

'We have been taught so much about the sinful system of this world but never to analyse the context. In module two, I was delighted to learn about the importance of respecting the dignity of the person and the human worth of the person. And that when that person is deprived and impoverished, it is obvious that they have to migrate. That for me was new – I had not analysed it from that point of view – and I think that if we help spread this type of knowledge we will also be able to change many things in our congregations.'

Pastor Laura Saa, Pastor of the Mount Sinai Foursquare Church, Vice President of the United Bible Societies and diploma student, Ecuador

- **This multicultural experience, especially during times of pandemic and virtual learning, has shown us that not everyone has the same opportunities to access and study online.** This applies to the availability of adequate equipment and connectivity. Therefore, we have sought creative, flexible and functional ways for learning to take place, without sacrificing quality. Theological formation today demands flexibility and a willingness to change.

We believe that the moment we live in is unique and hopeful. We are excited to see the number of actors involved in this movement of the Spirit. And we celebrate seeing how ecclesiastical practice and theological reflection are working together to bring glory to the God of life and wellbeing to those who right now are walking the migrant routes through our countries.

How you can support this alliance

- If you are in the Latin America and Caribbean region, be part of our ['As born among us' Campaign](#), to take action in favour of migrants by raising awareness, mobilising churches, advocating and integration.
- [Follow the campaign's Facebook channel](#) for updates on both the diploma and the migration situation in LAC.
- Support the advocacy actions we have to influence governments to approve new policies and laws that will give migrants improved legal status and access to rights.
- Pray for all the migrants that are leaving their homes, journeying in difficult conditions and trying to survive in new countries.
- Email Loida Carriel (luida.carriel@tearfund.org) for more information.

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