



Left: Delegations from parishes, high schools, and Immigrant Women's Circles join the roll call of member organizations at the SNL 2022 Assembly for Human Dignity. Right: At the SNL 2022 Assembly for Human Dignity, local elected officials discuss driver's licenses for immigrants campaign strategy with Michigan Catholic Conference staffer Paul Stankewitz.

## Strangers No Longer: Parish Circles of Support Welcome Migrants in Michigan

In 2017, US tensions arose over immigration policy, and laws echoing those public sentiments seemed to be taking hold. At the same time, a group of Catholics in Michigan listened to the words of Pope Francis.

BY RHINA GUIDOS

Some wondered how they could practice the pope's mandates to "welcome, protect, promote, and integrate" migrants in such a tense environment. Many migrants were arriving in their communities, part of a worldwide phenomenon as conflicts kept erupting, economies were spiraling downward, and people in distant lands began fleeing physical and economic dangers.

In Michigan, Detroit and Ann Arbor and their surrounding areas were not immune to the migrant currents affecting their communities. Instead of joining the rancor directed at these individuals, however, a

group of Michigan Catholics decided they had to do something to help. And that "something" sparked a now-expanding network of Catholics who work with the resulting network, called Strangers No Longer, organized at the parish level to support migrants.

"We were getting word that the effort of getting Congress to do any kind of meaningful immigration reform was just that, 'an effort,' not any kind of meaningful concrete action," said Bill O'Brien, now the organization's executive director. "So with that in mind, we said, 'Well, we're not going to sit on our hands.'"

An original group of roughly 120 Catholics from various parishes, including 12 priests and some bishops, assembled and decided to form small groups of parishioners to tend to the needs of the migrants, which the core group called "circles of support."

Some circles provided material help and gave rides to help migrants get to court or visit doctors. Others would listen and allow migrants to share stories of what they had experienced in their migration journey to the United States.

The work proved to be a "kind of self-empowerment and confidence building... for some of them," Bill said. But instead of merely allowing the circles to exist, "we actually formed a structure" to help other circles to form in nearby parishes. That structure became Strangers No Longer, described by the organization as "a network of parishes and congregations made up of Circles of Support to provide assistance to immigrants and to advocate for a comprehensive and humane immigration policy."

A parish or congregation forms each circle of support. On some occasions, they become places where migrants can talk about their specific experiences.

For Marisol Sanchez, a migrant who has participated in a circle of support, talking about what she has gone through helped her feel "like an empowered woman, more confident of myself and mentally and emotionally much more able to love and

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Through the CATHOLIC  
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DEVELOPMENT (CCHD) of the  
United States Conference of  
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Catholics and friends of CCHD

across the country help poor and low-income  
Americans to help themselves and their  
communities out of poverty.

Since 1970, the CCHD has contributed over  
\$440 million to nearly 12,000 low-income led,  
community-based projects that strengthen  
families, create jobs, build affordable  
housing, fight crime, and improve schools and  
neighborhoods. CCHD requires that projects  
develop community leadership and participation  
so their solutions to poverty will be long-lasting  
and effective, and so CCHD's investment in  
people will help break the cycle of poverty.  
CCHD also educates Catholics about the causes  
of poverty and seeks to build solidarity between  
impovertised and affluent persons.

LETTER FROM



THE DIRECTOR

Dear Friends,

One of the most rewarding parts of working for the Catholic Church is how the faithful gather to help another group and how their love of their neighbor builds a community of friends.

Such is the story of Strangers No Longer, a parish-based network of Catholics in Michigan who, since 2017, have listened to and put into practice Pope Francis's exhortations about welcoming, protecting, promoting, and integrating migrants. With grant money from the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD), the Strangers No Longer network formed the "circles of support" described in this issue. These circles provide newcomers with not only material help but also a warm welcome. They also educate the communities about the plight of migrants by explaining how and why people leave their home countries.

Some of these teaching moments have extended beyond the parish into Catholic learning centers. They have led to advocacy efforts on behalf of migrants. Catholic leaders have participated in campaigns asking local governments to develop more humane policies and practices regarding our brothers and sisters who have left their homelands and found a new home in the United States.

The CCHD subcommittee was delighted when participants presented their work at the subcommittee's July meeting, detailing their efforts in the areas of education, accompaniment, and advocacy. The presentation was particularly meaningful because the group named its efforts after the 20-year-old pastoral letter *Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope*, a joint publication by the USCCB and Mexican bishops, whose words remain relevant today. In that pastoral letter, the bishops of both countries called the faithful to look to Catholic social teaching's "moral framework for embracing, not rejecting, the reality of migration between our two nations" (no. 7).

These days, this "reality of migration" has helped us embrace our brothers and sisters from nations other than Mexico as well. Faith in Christ, the bishops wrote in the letter, is what "moves us to search for ways that favor a spirit of solidarity. It is a faith that transcends borders and bids us to overcome all forms of discrimination and violence so that we may build relationships that are just and loving" (no. 19).

This social justice work fueled Msgr. William F. Burke, the CCHD diocesan director for the Archdiocese of Baltimore, who died March 3 and whom we remember today. He had arranged to remember CCHD after his passing by asking for donations to the campaign in lieu of flowers. Just as he remembered CCHD, let us in the CCHD family remember him in our prayers, with hope that we will all be reunited in the eternal presence of Christ.

**RALPH McCLOUD**, Director  
*Catholic Campaign for Human Development*

You can be part of CCHD's critical work by donating at Mass or through your parish's online giving platform. #iGiveCatholicTogether also accepts funds for CCHD. Visit: <https://usccb.org/organizations/usccb-catholic-campaign-for-human-development> to learn more.



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help my family and loved ones,” as she said in testimony to the USCCB in July. She was part of a Strangers No Longer presentation organized by the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD), whose grants have funded part of the work. The group’s work aligns with this national antipoverty program of the US Catholic bishops. CCHD seeks to break the cycle of poverty by helping the poor take part in decisions that affect their lives and those of their families and communities.

Sr. Martha de la Torre, a member of the Sisters of Mary Reparatrix who coordinates circles of support for migrant women, also spoke during the July presentation. She explained to the bishops that the circles are considered spaces where migrants “can share their life experiences, pray, and receive spiritual formation and personal growth. The purpose is for them to be agents of transformation in their family, parish, and community.”

By sharing their life experiences, migrants come to know that they are not alone, and they feel accompanied, she said. Some of them have shared their stories in parishes, Catholic high schools, and universities.

“This is an educational element for American citizens. By hearing out loud the reasons why immigrants decide to leave their places of origin and face a reality of exclusion in their daily lives, listeners feel called to support the immigrant cause,” she told the bishops.

The circles of support have expanded in number but also in scope.

Bill, the Strangers No Longer executive director, said that not even the coronavirus could stop the organization from continuing its work. The circles provided outreach and education to farmworkers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their work led Strangers No Longer to collaborate with the Catholic dioceses of Grand Rapids, Gaylord, and Saginaw to develop a project funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The project directed health promoters to reach out to rural, Spanish-speaking communities and also provided access to COVID-19 vaccines. This work



Delegation of Adrian Dominican Sisters wait for Senate Majority Leader Winnie Brinks as part of the 2023 SNL Advocacy Day at the state capitol, working on driver’s licenses for immigrants legislation.

helped educate the communities, provided resources, and encouraged dialogue to reduce the number of COVID-19 infections.

Those inroads now have led to new initiatives, such as providing mental health support and other health-related resources to Spanish speakers in the area.

During the pandemic, Strangers No Longer also began to use Zoom to reach out to local elected officials and organize meetings where migrant voices would be heard. The network began advocating for more humane policies and practices toward migrants. This advocacy included a campaign supporting driver’s licenses for migrants. This campaign continues today, now urging lawmakers to support a bill allowing immigrants to obtain a driver’s license or state identification card, regardless of the person’s immigration status.

“We began working with the Michigan Catholic Conference to help parishioners realize that they did have a voice, that it’s their right and obligation and it actually benefits the parish to have them talking to their state representatives and state senators,” Bill said.

The organization took its name from the pastoral letter *Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope*, a joint 2003 publication by the USCCB and the Mexican

conference of Catholic bishops. In the letter, bishops from both countries called on the faithful to look to Catholic social teaching’s “moral framework for embracing, not rejecting, the reality of migration between our two nations” (no. 7).

Today, the reality of migration has expanded to include those fleeing wars from Ukraine and Syria, as well as those escaping political conflicts and economic upheaval in countries such as Nicaragua and Venezuela.

Strangers No Longer has presented those realities in the form of migrants’ testimonies offered through circles of support, which now number 20 in the southeastern Michigan area. Last December, the network’s efforts expanded further when Catholic leaders met with state legislators and a US congresswoman to continue pressing for the local development of more just services and policies for migrants.

“Over the past year, since action on immigration reform at the national level is stalled, we decided to focus our attention at the state level,” Rich Faba said in his July testimony to the USCCB. Rich is a member of Our Mother of Perpetual Help Parish and chairman of Strangers No Longer’s advocacy team. “We have a ways to go, but this work gives me something concrete that I can do to respond to immigrants among us,

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and to respond to Pope Francis as well. There has been amazing energy in our parishes and in our members. We are all learning to advocate.”

In February 2023, 162 members of the organization went to the Michigan state capitol and spoke to 65 legislators, Rich informed the bishops.

“It was a thrilling day—being with so many Catholics,” he said.

Msgr. Dan Trapp, moderator of Renaissance Vicariate Family of Parishes, said Strangers No Longer has helped parishes work on social justice issues important to the Michigan Catholic Conference.

“Strangers No Longer is not just about helping unfortunates; it’s about giving a hand to people who are sisters and brothers,” he said in his written testimony sent to the bishops.

The organization’s work includes what Pope Francis has been encouraging Catholics to do, from providing a welcome to integrating immigrants, from making them part of society to forming a community with them, said Bill, the executive director.

Back in September 2021, the organization celebrated the World Day of Migrants and Refugees, sponsored by the Vatican, with a Mass at Most Holy Trinity Parish in Detroit, attended by various local groups. In his homily, Fr. Adalberto Espinoza, an immigrant from Mexico, recalled growing up near the border with the United States. Even when he was a child, he said, people were heading north. He’d watch them walk through town, and sometimes he watched them die in the currents of the river. As a priest, he said, he has learned that each migrant has a story, often a difficult one. He encouraged people to listen to those stories.

He also praised the work of those who help migrants, particularly because Pope Francis has championed this mindset but sometimes struggled to persuade people of its importance.

“What you’re doing is something very nice . . . helping migrants to settle here in this country,” Fr. Adalberto said to those gathered. He added that as a country, as a civil society, the United States has borders—but as the pope has said, “as a Church, we’ve got to be open. We don’t have frontiers in the Church.”

MEMBER PROFILES

Remembering Msgr. Burke



Msgr. William F. Burke, who served CCHD for almost 50 years, passed away on March 3, 2023, at age 89. He had retired in 2021 as CCHD’s diocesan director for the Archdiocese of Baltimore, in Maryland, having worked with the campaign since 1972.

“I will always remember him for his passion and tenacity about social justice but, most importantly, about his commitment to empowering others,” said Sandy Mattingly Paulen, who met Msgr. Burke in 1985. She later worked with him at CCHD from 2014 to 2017, as he made recommendations to the subcommittee about grants for groups in the Archdiocese of Baltimore.

“Msgr. Burke always fought passionately for the organizing and economic development groups from the Baltimore archdiocese,” she said. “He empowered everyone he came in contact with.”

His two passions—his native city of Baltimore and social justice—came together at CCHD.

Ordained in 1959 in Belgium, where he was studying, he returned to serve at parishes around Baltimore. In 1980, he was assigned to St. Francis of Assisi Parish, where he was a beloved pastor until his retirement in 2021, the same year when he retired from his CCHD post.

Msgr. Richard Bozzelli, who took over the CCHD duties for Baltimore, also offered the homily at Msgr. Burke’s funeral Mass at St. Francis of Assisi on March 10.

“Bill Burke didn’t have a pretentious bone in his body,” he said. “He respected the ordinariness in people, identified with the simplicity of their lives, and cared for them with dignity and respect.”

Msgr. Burke ministered in the city because that’s where the need was, he said.

“And those needs weren’t burdens to endure but opportunities to know the love of God through the love of God’s people,” Msgr. Bozzelli continued. “For Bill, love wasn’t some kind of warm and fuzzy feeling. . . . For Bill Burke, love was the hard work of caring for others, day in and day out.”

Msgr. Burke saw the need to change the structures of society that make people poor, Msgr. Bozzelli said.

“He saw the priest’s obligations to work for that change as part and parcel of his call to heal a suffering world,” he said. “Bill dedicated himself to that work in his nearly 50 years as Baltimore’s diocesan director for the Catholic Campaign for Human Development.”

He embraced CCHD’s efforts “not to give people a handout, but a hand up,” he said.



AN INITIATIVE OF THE  
CATHOLIC CAMPAIGN FOR  
HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

More than 40 million  
Americans live in poverty.

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