As we respond to the challenges of today, we are called to remember both our biblical history, as we did in the previous session, and our corporate history. We have done a recital of the migrations of our biblical ancestors; we need now to understand and remember the migration of our borders. We’ll be doing this in a very short time, so there will be a lot we are going to miss, but let’s try to do this.

The Migration of Borders

First, let’s be clear about this: Migration is as old as Adam and Eve, but there was no such thing as immigration until there was such a thing as a border between two countries. [Visual of border fence at Douglas, AZ/Agua Prieta, Son projected onto screen] This is what the border between the United States and Mexico looks like at Douglas, AZ and its twin city of Agua Prieta, Sonora, where I live and work.

I want you to imagine that you are standing with your back up against that wall, facing south, looking toward the southern border of Mexico and Guatemala. You are on the south side of that wall. Where would you be standing?

Now, it is the United States. At that place you would be in the U.S. unless you have very large feet or a very large belly.

But let’s transport ourselves back over 600 years to the year 1400. Where would you be standing, if you were in that same spot in the year 1400?

The answer: First Nations land, indigenous territory … before the arrival of people from Europe and any connection to that continent.

Now let’s imagine it is 1550. Where would we be standing?

Answer: La Pimería Alta (Father Kino’s name for this high region of the Pimas). Perhaps First Nations land. The Europeans would have called it New Spain, but to many it was contested land.

Now let’s transport ourselves up to 1821. Where are we now? Mexico? First Nations land? Or contested land? In European terms, it was Mexico. The Mexican War for Independence went from 1810 to 1821, so from the point of view of many south of here, it was Mexico at this point.
Then the Mexican-American War went from 1846 to 1848; at the end of that war, the border between the two countries was largely established by way of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (or as it is often known in Mexico, the “North American Intervention”).

So where would we be standing if this picture were taken in 1848?

Answer: Mexico! This part of the country did not become part of the U.S. until after the Gadsden Purchase in 1854, when the land south of the Gila River and west of the Rio Grande became part of the U.S. The land where this photo was taken first became New Mexico Territory, then Arizona territory, and then in 1912, the state of Arizona.

It’s important to remember that people are not the only ones who migrate; borders migrate as well. We have, in this part of the world, a mixing of persons from European and indigenous backgrounds, as well as a lot of other backgrounds, in a place that itself has experienced migration, the migration of its own political borders. There are people around here who say, “We didn’t cross the border; the border crossed us.” It is important to remember that as part of the reality.

Why do borders migrate? Politics… Money… War…. It is not always a peaceful thing. Violence is often a part of the migration of borders. It is an important part of our corporate story.

The Meaning of Borders

We must also think about how the meaning of these borders has changed. The meaning and implications of borders change, and I want us to think about some important dates in that regard in this last century or so as well.

When the border between the United States and Mexico was finalized in the 1850s, was it a border that was designed to prevent people of Mexican descent from crossing back and forth to see their families on the other side? To keep commerce from going back and forth? No, there really wasn’t much sense of that.

When was the first time that the government of the United States placed an armed presence on this border because it was worried about what might cross it? It happened in 1915 during the Mexican Civil War. The U.S. sent troops to Douglas, not too far from where this photo was taken, to “hold the line” during the Second Battle of Agua Prieta.

[Prior to this, in 1906, the U.S. had sent a group of armed folks into Mexico, at the request of Porfirio Diaz, the longtime dictator, to put down a strike, which was a precursor to the Revolution. Then, during the Revolution, there was a strong U.S. military presence on the border to keep the violence from seeping over into the U.S.]

But back to 1915: The Mexican Revolution succeeded in deposing Porfirio Diaz, the dictator of over 30 years, and he fled the country. After he fled, there was a civil war, as factions of the
revolution sparred for power. Pancho Villa led one faction, and there was another faction led by Vanustiano Carranza. The U.S. had pledged neutrality, but the fighting was coming right up to the border and eventually the U.S. had to decide which side they would support. Pancho Villa had plans to come over to Agua Prieta, so as Pancho Villa was coming west, Carranza contacted the Wilson Administration and asked the U.S. for two things: 1) to allow his troops to cross U.S. territory to get to Agua Prieta, and 2) to send troops from El Paso to Douglas to back up his troops in Agua Prieta. The U.S. government said yes to both points, and from that point on, Pancho Villa became our enemy. John Pershing and Pancho Villa, once pictured hugging each other, became mortal enemies. Villa was soundly defeated at Agua Prieta, where Plutarco Elias Calles, later president of Mexico, led the reinforced troops.

This military presence at the border did not keep families from crossing back and forth however. Yet because of the revolution, much of which happened in the northern regions of Mexico, many people fled to the United States to escape the violence.

1924 was the year that the U.S. Border Patrol, the first civilian law enforcement agency to control our borders, was founded. There were two offices: El Paso and Detroit. Think about what was going on in the 1920s – Prohibition. We wanted to keep illegal drugs (in a liquid form) from crossing the border. To this day, preventing illegal drugs from entering the United States continues to be one of the main goals of the U.S. Border Patrol. The second reason the Border Patrol was founded was to enforce the Chinese Exclusion Act and prevent Chinese immigrants from entering the U.S.

1929 – The Stock Market crashes. And what happens to the U.S. economy in the 1930s? The Great Depression. What happens to people from Mexico who happen to be in the U.S.? The 1930s brought the first mass deportation of people from the United States back to Mexico. This deportation, however, affected more than people who came to the U.S. without papers; U.S. citizens were also caught up in the raids. Countless hundreds of citizens, from families whom the border had crossed, were also caught up in the raids.

A fascinating movie – one of the best Hollywood has produced on this subject – is “Mi Familia/My Family” [1995, New Line Cinema, DVD released 2004, Spanish version video also available], which follows a family over several generations from Mexico to East Los Angeles. One of the scenes depicts this deportation. It’s a powerful movie, with all sorts of fascinating themes.

**The Migration of Labor**

1940s – World War II. What happened to the U.S. economy in the 1940s? It boomed. What happened to the labor supply during the 1940s? It went to war. And who came into the workforce to serve the engines of war? Women … Rosie the Riveter. Her image is part of our history. Rosie’s picture is in all our history books. Women came into the economy to save not only the United States, but the whole world, from fascism. That is what our history teaches.
But what our history books seldom teach us is that there was another group of people who entered the workforce in large numbers during that period - braceros, male workers from Mexico. In 1942, the U.S. and Mexico worked out an agreement that would permit the legal entry into the U.S. of large numbers of Mexican men. Bracero means “arm”: We wanted people’s arms … not their minds, not their hearts, not their beings, but their arms. Our history books don’t have a picture of those arms though… Only Rosie’s.

I was a history major in college, studying to be a teacher, so when I was working on this presentation, I went back to my college textbook for my “Introduction to U.S. History” course, and I read about this period. I saw Rosie the Riveter, but I didn’t see anything about Juan the Bracero. Why? Why do we not hear about Juan the Bracero? Did Juan the Bracero help sustain our economy during a time of war? Of course, but we don’t remember him the way we remember Rosie….

Let’s remember, let’s remember, let’s remember.

The Bracero Program was a temporary program. It was meant to be a five year program, from 1942 to 1947. What was going on in the world in 1947? What happened? The war is over, and the G.I.s are coming home. Did they go back into the fields? No… They went to college under the G.I. Bill, one of the most amazing pieces of legislation that our country has ever passed. Thousands of working class folks, who otherwise would never have had the opportunity for higher education, were granted the opportunity to go and study. It was not like the G.I. bill of today, where you can get tuition but you have to work forty hours and keep your family poor. The original G.I. bill let you study full time, have a stipend, have housing; it allowed returning soldiers to study full time and take care of their families. It was one of the legislative acts that created the nation as we know it today.

But what happened to the labor supply? The economy continued to grow, but we still didn’t have all those men back in the labor force. So the U.S. and Mexican governments extended the Bracero Program for another five years, and then another five years, until 1964. And what happened in 1964?

In the 1960s, there were two large political forces in the United States that came together to do away with the Bracero Program. The first was organized labor. Unions were concerned about loss of jobs to braceros and the depression of wages represented by non-union labor for, of course, braceros were not unionized. The other force was the Civil Rights Movement. Civil rights groups made the point that the Bracero Program was a bad thing because, in their view, it was a legalized form of slavery.

Why would they say that?

Let me give you an example…. Suppose I were a bracero, up here from Mexico and working for “Selena,” a grower, picking tomatoes for her. I could come into the country legally, but I could
only work for Selena. I can’t legally work for anyone else; I am documented to do exactly one thing – work for Selena. It’s harvest time, and I bring in 2000 pounds of tomatoes, and I take them to Selena and I say “Señora, here are your tomatoes.” But she says, “Oh, Mark, you are such a great tomato picker, and I’m so proud of you, but I have a problem. I haven’t been paid for these tomatoes yet; would it be OK if I paid you next week?” And I say, “Sure, that’s OK, next week will be fine.” I come back next week with another 2000 pounds of tomatoes. And Selena says, “That’s wonderful; I got paid for last week’s tomatoes, but I can only pay you for half of what I owe you for this week. I’ll catch up next week.” And so it continues…. There were folks who followed the rules and lots of folks who didn’t follow the rules. So what do I do? Do I complain? What would happen if I do? The word would get out that I’m a problem worker, and Selena would try to send me back to Mexico. And if I left Selena’s farm and tried to work for someone else, no one would hire me.

One of the things about the Bracero Program is that it was supposed to be a temporary program; men would work for ten months and then they would have to go home. Employers were supposed to provide housing. But I have talked with braceros who are still around, and they tell me that sometimes they had to live in a converted chicken coop or under tarps. Their drinking water came from the irrigation taps. In other words, there were some major abuses, and the program was discontinued in 1964.

Two questions….

Do you think the end of the Bracero Program stopped people from crossing the border to look for work? It did not. At that point, in 1965, people did not have to risk their lives to come to the U.S. to work for Selena or the hundreds of other growers. Crossing was easy, even without the program, even without papers. The border had not changed at that point.

But…. Do you think the Mexican government and the U.S. government thought it was a good idea to have hundreds of thousands of unemployed Mexican men on the south side of the U.S./Mexican border? Why not? …Because of the potential for revolution. The United States didn’t want there to be another revolution in Mexico, and neither did Mexico. There needed to be stability.

So the U.S. government and the Mexican government got together in 1965 and developed what’s called the Border Industrialization Act, which created a kind of Free Trade Zone area all along the border. Under this act, U.S. companies could go to the border and build twin factories, one in Mexico, one in the U.S. Factories on the Mexico side paid lower wages than the ones in the U.S., but the wages were much higher than in the rest of Mexico at the time. It seemed like a win-win situation – a constant supply of jobs on both sides of the border, and a ready source of labor for U.S. companies in Mexico.

Border towns on both sides of the border grew rapidly, but growth on the Mexico side was especially rapid. These factories, known as maquiladores, were a huge magnet for migration to
the north from other parts of Mexico. The Border Industrialization Act was supposed to stimulate economic growth on both sides of the border, but it didn’t exactly work out that way.

In the 1980s, Douglas and Agua Prieta were part of this growth. Lily of the Valley Presbyterian Church in Agua Prieta, the first Presbyterian Church in the state of Sonora, was founded in 1984. At the time, it was largely made up of northern Mexico folks who may have been culturally Catholic but were not active in the life of the church. But they became involved in the church, came into relationship with Jesus Christ, and formed a new kind of Presbyterian church. Few members had a Presbyterian background. Then in the late 1980s-1990s, there was a sudden influx of people from southern Mexico, many of whom came to work in the factories; among them were lots of Presbyterians, people who had been Presbyterian for generations in southern Mexico. The National Presbyterian Church of Mexico is over 138 years old, and it is larger percentage-wise in Mexico than the PC(USA) is in the U.S.

1994 – The Nexus of Politics, Economics and Immigration

We need to jump ahead now to 1994, when three events happened that we need to consider when we think about U.S./Mexico relationships.

The first was NAFTA – the North American Free Trade Agreement, which expanded the Border Industrialization Act from the southern border of Mexico all the way up to the Arctic. The governments of all three countries – Mexico, the U.S. and Canada – worked hard to reach this agreement. The U.S. did not force NAFTA on Mexico; it was seen as being of “mutual benefit” for the people of all three nations.

Second, on January 1, 1994, the day that NAFTA went into effect, the Zapatistas, an indigenous party in Chiapas in the south of Mexico, rose up in rebellion against the Mexican government. There are over 60 official languages and indigenous groups recognized in the Mexican constitution, and the Zapatistas, a coalition of indigenous groups, felt that NAFTA would speed up the destruction of these indigenous cultures. They felt that Mexico had sold out indigenous people; they felt this way for at least three reasons:

1) Land – From the days of independence through the revolution, from 1821 to 1910, land had been concentrated into the hands of a few large landholders, but the revolution had changed that. Land had been distributed to indigenous peoples, and was precious to them. The revolution was led with the phrase, “Land and Freedom, Tierra y Libertad.” The constitution that emerged after the revolution said that communal land could never be sold; this was to prevent history from repeating itself, to keep wealthy ranchers from grabbing tracts of land away from indigenous farmers. But to be able to participate in NAFTA, Mexico had to change that part of its constitution. Communal land could now be sold. To the Zapatistas, this was a bad thing. The government, however, felt it was a good thing, that it would help lead Mexico into the industrial age and create work.
2) Tariffs on goods coming into Mexico from the U.S. and Canada were removed. This profoundly affected Mexican agriculture, for under the free market arrangement through NAFTA, Mexico could no longer exclude commodities such as corn and soybeans from the U.S.

3) There was an end to agricultural subsidies to small farmers in Mexico.

[In the meanwhile, U.S. agricultural subsidies to corn and soybean farmers have risen in the last sixteen years, to the tune of $40 billion a year. And it’s not just a U.S./Mexico thing. Whenever the so-called “developed” world and the so-called “developing” world sit down for trade talks, agriculture is always a sticking point. The North (Europe and the U.S.) wants to keep their agricultural subsidies, and the South says, “We dropped ours, you did not; you need to drop yours.”]

All this put highly-industrialized, highly-productive, efficient and highly-subsidized U.S. and Canadian agribusiness in direct competition with non-subsidized, subsistence farmers in Mexico. As a result, the farmers in Mexico couldn’t make it. It was now possible to sell land, so farmers sold their land and moved to the cities to find work. And when they got to the north, they found NAFTA-created jobs with U.S. companies.

In 1992, Ross Perot was running for president, and he talked about the giant sucking sound that could be heard from the south due to NAFTA. He was talking about jobs going to Mexico. Textile jobs, for instance, had first gone from New England to places like Georgia and South Carolina, and then, with NAFTA, to Mexico. So even though there was an industrial boom and lots of industrial job creation in Mexico, there was a huge economic crisis in Mexican agriculture. There was a gain but also a loss, particularly in the agricultural sector in Mexico.

In the early 1990s, the U.S. was coming out of a recession. Remember the catch phrase for the 1992 Clinton campaign? “It’s the Economy, Stupid.” The economy was in rough shape, and Clinton rode the wave of discontent into the White House. During the campaign, however, Pat Buchanan came into the political realm. He went to San Diego and saw people crossing the border in huge numbers. He talked about the importance of securing our border and stopping the “brown wave.” He never became the candidate of any party, but his argument in the debate influenced all the candidates, and Clinton became a great supporter of increasing border enforcement. The economic situation in the early 90s influenced all the partners in NAFTA.

So 1994 was a pivotal year in Mexico: There was agricultural sector job loss. Tariffs for imported agricultural goods went away. There was a boom in the industrial sector in the north of Mexico. In the meanwhile, job creation in the U.S. was focused in the service sector. It was a time that exacerbated the push/pull that was already active in the border area.
At this same time, politically, the border underwent the largest transformation in our history. I said a moment ago that there were three huge events in 1994. There was NAFTA, there was the Zapatista Uprising, and then there was Operation Gatekeeper.

Operation Gatekeeper began as a pilot program (Operation Hold-the-Line) in El Paso in 1993, where Border Patrol Chief, Silvestre Reyes, said, “I can’t stop the brown wave everywhere, but I can stop people from crossing right here in El Paso.” So he set up guards every few yards, then behind them, more guards were placed in the spaces between the guards in the front line. In football, this is called goal line defense. It worked very effectively to keep people from crossing the border at El Paso, and it worked politically. But people moved away from the cities and began crossing elsewhere … in the remote desert areas between the cities. The goal of El Paso was defended, but there were 2000 more miles of sidelines.

In 1994, Operation Gatekeeper was carried out in San Diego/Tijuana. Walls went up. More and more, border crossers were being forced into the desert.

Border “Control” and Its Consequences

For 150 years there had been a fluid border between U.S. and Mexico, but suddenly the border was robustly enforced. We had suddenly decided to change our policy and “control” our borders. The theme was push/pull, come/come, go/go, and then when you get here, no/no. People were forced to the desert areas of Arizona, primarily Douglas/Agua Prieta. And Operation Gatekeeper was just the beginning. In Arizona, we had Operation Safeguard (1996). In Texas there was Operation Rio Grande (2003). The number of Border Patrol agents was doubled, then doubled again, until now we have more than 20,000 Border Patrol agents on the border. And now, in this election year, cries to increase the numbers are once again being raised.

Has the strategy been effective? Despite our attempts to “control” the border, the reality of immigration has spread, due to the push/pull factors, to virtually the entire country.

In 1994, I was teaching Spanish in Clover, South Carolina; other than myself and my students, there were about two Spanish-speaking persons in town. I went back there ten years later, in 2004. And what did I find, ten years after we started beefing up our border “control”? From the roof of the Piggly Wiggly grocery store hung a large banner featuring Mexican and Guatemalan flags and the words: “Tenemos productos hispanos.” The First Baptist church was offering free English as a Second Language classes. In the bank, a sign asked if you wanted service in English or Spanish. In ten years, Clover, South Carolina had gone from two Spanish-speaking people to marketing to the Spanish-speaking population.

In 1994, there were 2.5 million undocumented persons of Spanish descent in the U.S. Now, after “sealing” the border, there are more than 12 million. Has our strategy been effective? Has it accomplished its stated purpose?
I would say that it has not, but what has it accomplished?

- Deaths in the desert – 5500 bodies have been found. That doesn’t include the deaths of persons whose bodies have not been found.
- Smuggling – drugs and people – is a growth industry. The cost to get across the border has risen from $150 – if a smuggler were needed at all – to $800 in 1998, to $2000 – with much higher risk – now.
- More injuries and amputations due to falling or jumping off the fence while attempting to cross.

Conclusion and Challenge

Think about how we create policy. This is our policy. We, as Americans, can’t blame anyone else. If we as people of faith don’t like this policy, we have to think about how to respond in more effective, faithful and humane ways – and reform it.

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