We all have the call to welcome the stranger. This is what I tell congregations when I speak as the MCC U.S. immigration education coordinator. I talk about how the Old Testament and New Testament tell us to welcome strangers in our midst and to make sure they have what they need, that grain should be left that they can glean.

And I also speak about my own experience of being the stranger—and how the church took care of me. I was 15 years old when we left my home country of Guatemala for Canada. And when we arrived, the church was the first body to embrace us. I know personally the church can do the work of embracing. And I know it’s important.

You need somebody to embrace you in the pains of being away from home.

I was born in Guatemala City in 1970, right in the middle of Guatemala’s civil war. But for the first eight years of my life, things seemed normal. My father was studying veterinary medicine. My mother was a homemaker. There were five of us children.

Then on Oct. 20, 1978, life took a turn.

On that day during heavy protesting in Guatemala City, my dad, who was part of those protesting, was kidnapped. When he reappeared a few days later in a hospital, I remember going there to see him. I was 9 years old at the time, and I could not recognize my dad. He had been tortured. He had broken bones in his face.

At that time in Guatemala, the death squads were all over the place, and my dad was afraid that they were after him. Eventually, he gave up his idea of a veterinary clinic, sold the equipment he had gotten together for it and went to Mexico.

In 1980, we joined him there, getting a visa for three months. But he remained in Mexico, going to Canada as a refugee in 1981, while we returned to Guatemala.

My mom and brothers and sisters and I remained separated from my dad until 1986, when the Canadian government accepted us to come to Canada as immigrants.

When I speak about my experience and what it’s like to migrate, I speak about a new birth.

Like the pushes and pulls in the womb, there are these push and pull factors of immigration. They happen inside the motherland, the womb, pushing you toward leaving and pulling you toward a new place. Then suddenly you just go out of the womb and end up somewhere else.

And in so many ways it feels like you’re a new baby, and you have to be trained again in life and how to encounter these new environments.
Saulo Padilla, MCC U.S. immigration education coordinator, visits with his mother, Amparo Marroquín de Padilla, in Guatemala City in December 2011.
We landed in Canada on Feb. 19, 1986. When we left Guatemala, it was about 25 degrees Celsius (77 Fahrenheit). In Canada it was probably -25 Celsius (-13 Fahrenheit). At the airport, we were taken into this room where there were lots of jackets and hats, boots, snow boots and gloves. Once we walked outside, we figured out why they were giving us all these things to wear. It was kind of like walking into a freezer.

Everything was different in Canada. When my mother used to go out and shop at Safeway, a grocery store, she could not find black beans or the flour she used to make tortillas. She had to figure out what she could make out of what she could find. You had to be clothed differently. People start talking to you and you don’t understand a word they’re saying.

How well you do and whether you thrive depends on the people that receive you. If they receive you in a way that’s nurturing to you and gives you opportunities to develop, then you have more chances of being productive in that new environment.

The body that welcomed us was the church. After we reunited with my dad in Calgary, Alberta, we began looking for a congregation. Students that my brother and I knew from English classes invited us to a youth group meeting.

That was at the First Hispanic Mennonite Church in Calgary.

We didn’t know what the Mennonites were, but when we arrived at this church, well, they were singing the same songs that we were singing in Guatemala in some of the services.

So we felt very much at home, and they welcomed us very, very well.

The church was a mixture of refugees and immigrants, many fleeing war in El Salvador, Chile, Nicaragua. So it seemed like a lot of them understood the role of welcoming the strangers suffering from these issues as well.

We needed that embrace.

While reuniting with my dad was very good, being separated from him for several years meant we had to get to know each other again. I had grown up. The last time I saw him was in 1980. I was 10. I got to Canada, and I was 15 already, and a lot of things had changed me and changed him. This was true with my brothers and sisters too. We had all changed.

The relationship between my dad and my mom, after the years of separation, was kind of rough at the beginning and continued to deteriorate. They both had changed a lot. Eventually my mom and dad decided they couldn’t live together anymore. The weather, the relationship with my dad and so many other things had caused a deep depression with my mom, and she had lost a lot of weight. She was sick enough that she went back to...
Guatemala City with my younger sister. At that time, we couldn’t keep in touch with phone cards, cell phones or through the computer like we do today; phone calls cost $4 or $5 a minute, and she had to go to a neighbor’s house or phone center to call.

I probably felt the embrace of the church the strongest after my mom returned to Guatemala.

My dad traveled quite a bit for his job. My brothers and I would spend two or three weeks at a time by ourselves. People in the church would invite us home to eat at their place or stay with them. The mothers in the church, I think, kind of saw us as their children too and were taking care of us.

Our youth leaders did an amazing job of guiding us during this time. I saw quite a few young people getting into trouble with drugs and alcohol. I think it was the care of people in the church that helped us stay in the church and not take those routes.

I know in society so many times people tend to push strangers out and don’t know what to do with strangers.

But I think of this community that received me when I was going through all these experiences and how they were able to embrace me. I think of the stories of Mennonites coming from Russia, from Europe, brothers and sisters welcoming each other. And I think of the churches I see now throughout the U.S. that are welcoming people with stories very much like mine.

I know the church can do this work.

Saulo Padilla is MCC U.S. immigration education coordinator. Padilla’s continued involvement with the First Hispanic Mennonite Church in Calgary, Alberta, led to an invitation to Goshen (Ind.) College’s Hispanic Ministries program. After graduating in 2005, Padilla earned a master’s degree in theology and ethics from Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Ind. He now lives in Goshen, Ind. He and his wife, Vilma, are active in Iglesia Menonita del Buen Pastor. Photos on pages 15 and 17 are by Melissa Engle, a freelance photographer in Lancaster, Pa. Family photos were provided by Saulo Padilla.

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