



## Families in Detention



# Escaping for Family Safety

### Scripture, Matthew 2:7, 13-16:

*The three kings, having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod...returned to their country by another route....When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him." So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi.*

### Reflection:

The nights in Bethlehem around the Holy Family did not stay silent for long—and there was little chance for the young family to enjoy the gifts selected and carried so carefully by the magi over a great distance. In modern terms, there was barely time for them to worship and take a “selfie” at the stable before a stark change of plans enveloped them—as Herod’s bitterness and anger turned starlight and joy into darkness and fear. Of course, it was not only the Wise Men who scurried away quickly to hide from Herod. The Holy Family themselves departed under cover, through a dangerous route and into the unknown Egyptian desert. Due to Herod’s threat of death, they left their home country, no doubt fearing they would never be able to return.

The necessity of their escape to avoid danger and their fearful movement along a precarious path parallels the flight of tens of thousands of Central Americans who have left Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador in 2014 and recent years. Like Jesus’ family, their prayer is to find security and hope in their exodus. Are we protecting them as they arrive?

**Background of Family Detention**—The U.S. government detains more than 34,000 individuals each day who are facing removal (or deportation) proceeding to determine whether they will be able to lawfully remain in the U.S. These include asylum seekers, refugees, torture survivors, undocumented migrants, victims of human trafficking, long-term lawful permanent residents, and parents of children who are U.S. citizens. Due to a stark increase in families fleeing violence in Central America and seeking protection, **the federal government has placed nearly 4,000 mothers, babies, and children in detention facilities.** These families are kept in jail-like conditions while they wait for their court cases to be determined. The U.S. has tried the tactic of family detention before with the T. Don Hutto Detention Facility in Texas, which opened in 2006 and closed to families in 2009 due to substandard conditions and due process violations. A recent report from Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service & Women’s Refugee Commission documents most of the families detained (such as 98% at the Karnes facility) are seeking protection; **fleeing violence, domestic abuse, and dangerous gang-related activity from which their governments are often unable to offer protection.** Infants, pregnant women, and toddlers are detained in jail-like conditions, putting them at risk of permanent psychological trauma. More than 50% of the children are aged 6 years or younger.

**Story from Artesia, N.M. Detention Center**—Many children and mothers who arrived last summer were detained in a remote center located in Artesia, N.M., including Isabella and her daughters Maria (10) and Cynthia (4). Isabella left San Pedro de Sula, Honduras after her husband was killed along with his two passengers while transporting them in his taxi to the airport. The murderers were drug gangsters. Two months later, Isabella sold her husband’s taxi in fear, and paid the money to a “coyote” who promised to help her cross the border. Once in the U.S., the coyote fled—and the mother and daughters were caught, and have suffered in detention since. In December, the detention center in Artesia was closed amid complaints of human rights violations (go to: <http://www.detentionwatchnetwork.org/ExposeAndClose> to learn more), and migrants like Isabella and her daughters were moved to Karnes City and South Texas Family Residential Centers in Texas. The South Texas Center is in Dilley.

# Families in Detention



## Why are Families Detained?

*This is part of a strategy to “stem the flow” of migration and send a clear message of deterrence. These women and children are fleeing violence and seeking asylum in the U.S. The asylum process requires each person who claims a fear of return to her country must be given a credible fear interview to evaluate if the claim has validity. Then she must appear in asylum court to determine whether she will remain in the United States as an asylee or be deported. Throughout this process, the mothers and children are locked up in one of the family detention centers. Detention is intended for people who are a security threat or who might flee the state. However, these families do not pose a security or flight risk—but are rather in the legal process of seeking asylum. Families are detained unnecessarily without due consideration for placement in an alternative to detention. Conditions in detention, including highly restricted movement and inadequate medical care, also raise concerns for both their psycho-social welfare and protection.*

## What is a Family Residential Center Like?



**Road to Karnes County Residential Center. Photo credit: Katharina Obser**

The Karnes facility has capacity for 530 beds with an expansion planned for the near future. It is located an hour from the closest city, making it difficult for families to get legal representation for their cases. The facility is operated by the Geo Group, Inc., a private prison company. **Bunk beds at Karnes. Photo Credit: Eric Sigmon.**

**Where is the Newest Family Center?** The South Texas Family Residential Center opened as a family detention facility in mid-December. It is already housing hundreds of family members (many who have been transferred there from other facilities such as Artesia), and will have capacity for 2,400 beds. The facility is located in Dilley, Texas. Dilley is over 70 miles from San Antonio, Texas; the nearest major city. Like the Karnes facility, it is operated by a private prison company, the Corrections Corporation of America.

**(Above information from “Locking Up Family Values, Again” report.)**

## How Can People of Faith Help Families?

- Download and read the “Locking Up Family Values, Again” report from Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service and Women’s Refugee Commission, found at: [lirs.org](http://lirs.org).)
- Write to children and families in detention through our partnership with the Church World Service “Angel to Angel” program. See information in [English](#) and [Spanish](#) and for sample letters and instructions in both English or Spanish.
- Consider visiting migrants in detention facilities through LIRS’ visitation ministry. Go to: <http://lirs.org/act/visitation/> to find a visitation ministry near you or to start your own
- Become a Pen Pal with a family member. E-mail [visitation@lirs.org](mailto:visitation@lirs.org) to be partnered with someone in detention.

**Prayer:** God, as we remember the escape of Jesus’ family for safety, link our minds in understanding, open our hearts to compassion, and direct our feet in action for children and mothers detained. Change their captivity to liberty, replace their fear with fortitude, and turn their suffering in custody into a hopefulness for humane and community centered care. AMEN.

*Go to our Disciples RIM website at: <https://www.discipleshomemissions.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/DISCIPLES-Families-in-Detention-Resource-Jan2015-FINAL.pdf>*

*for this 2 pager, and for other ways you & your church can help refugees & immigrants.*

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