



IM4HI PROFILE: Pilgrimage

One way that IM4HI organizes for justice is through pilgrimage. IM4HI members join together across faiths to sojourn together, traveling to sites of significance to shine a light on suffering caused by incarceration and the ways that we are all connected as human beings.

Pilgrimage is an act of witness, of unity, of sacred memory, and a commitment to a new way forward.

// IM4HI offers a path to wholeness with their unique approach to organizing. They are not just talking about the United States and California. They are acknowledging what is happening around the globe. They are offering an invitation for people to step into their wholeness, which inevitably means looking at the systems that get in the way of freedom and justice for our communities. It also means that IM4HI offers a vision of what wholeness can look like and creates opportunities for people to experience that wholeness in the present."

—Mari Ryono, FLA Capacity Coach for IM4HI

IM4HI's first pilgrimage was in 2010 in the context of the 100th anniversary of the opening of the Angel Island Immigration Detention Center. We have returned to Angel Island over the years, most recently in the Fall of 2022.

// In 2010 there were still survivors of those detained at Angel Island. Today we bring descendants and people who were detained in immigration detention today to Angel Island to heal...That is a way to mark that specific land and to bring people back to the site and remember that place in a particular way. It is to name places of suffering, to reclaim them as sacred places as part of the tradition of post-colonial pilgrimage."

—Reverend Deborah Lee, Executive Director, IM4HI

We have undertaken a series of four delegations to Honduras as part of its pilgrimage work. The aim is to deepen understanding about the root causes of forced migration and build relationships with organizations addressing root causes of mining, violence, and environmental degradation causing people to flee. IM4HI Board member Affad Shaikh shares how the experience of pilgrimage to Central America with IM4HI transformed his understanding and resonated with his own family's experience:

// I went on a pilgrimage to Central America, we went to Honduras with some faith leaders, then to Guatemala, and then Chiapas in Mexico. It was incredibly empowering for me to understand some of the issues behind the migrant stories, what migrants were facing, and the work that was being done to help migrants.

But also to see firsthand the issues that were pushing people off land, pushing people out of their communities, pushing people to migrate north. To me, it seemed an incredibly difficult decision to make. And, as somebody who had been involved with faith-based community work as well as civil rights issues here in the United States, it dawned on me that this was an issue that is often discussed in a black and white political sense. And that there was a human factor. Nobody was really addressing some of the human concerns. To me it was important to really engage with that.

And then, part of my story also was that in going on that trip, I understood better my own family history. My grandparents were part of the 1947 partition of South Asia. And a lot of the things that I heard my grandmother talk about in terms of her experiences, I never understood them in the context of migration, or in the context of being pushed off of land, being pushed into a refugee lifestyle. Those things never hit home to me until I saw it firsthand and I experienced some of the issues with migrants having to make decisions about leaving home. And that's where those stories really started to resonate. I felt that it was part of something that was familiar to me.

In 2020, we began planning for a pilgrimage through California, to all the immigration detention facilities as a way to connect people impacted and communities organizing to close immigration detention facilities up and down the state. While the pandemic slowed these plans, a seven-stop pilgrimage throughout the state took place with great success in Fall of 2022.

//After we closed the detention center in Richmond, we realized we knew very little about the other California detention centers far away in remote places. We realized we need to be present on those lands, to offer ceremony and prayer and testimony. We rented a bus, we did a thousand miles in 5 days! We had people formerly detained in those facilities come along with spiritual leaders and organizers.

It was about being able to understand the story of the land, the indigenous peoples, the water, the environmental issues, the pattern of economic development. The pilgrimages have become transformative experiences for the people who participate. This is an important form of leadership development. When on pilgrimage with each other, people of all kinds - multigenerational, multi-faith, multi-racial - people get to experience beloved community."

—Reverend Deborah Lee, IM4HI Executive Director

Going forward pilgrimage will be part of each of our three regions: the Inland Empire region has just completed a Southern California Desert Border pilgrimage, and the Los Angeles region plans a pilgrimage centered on reparations, to Allensworth, the first African American town founded in California. IM4HI's staff and board recognizes pilgrimage as a powerful organizing and leadership development tool to build awareness, momentum, and community around the immigrant rights and anti-incarceration movements.

//You could see it as a sort of educational campaign going up and down the state. And then all those people on the bus, the learning curves and the extraordinary kind of transformation that happened while they were on the bus - how can we do more pilgrimages? How do you move people to find their hope and their spirit in a collective sense? It's a very faith rooted methodology of organizing. I think that's so powerful."

—Martha Matsuoka, IM4HI Board member