

# Texas, Mexico partnership produces base camp for ministry\_50304

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Volunteers help construct facilities at Camp Getsemani, the only church camp in Coahuila, Mexico.

## Texas, Mexico partnership produces base camp for ministry

**By George Henson**

*Staff Writer*

ACUNA, Mexico—A partnership between a Mexican church and three Texas congregations has produced a ministry base camp on the south side of the Rio Grande.

Camp Getsemani, a ministry of First Baptist Church of Acuña, Tallowood Baptist Church in Houston, First Baptist Church in Edna and First Baptist Church in San Antonio, is “the only semblance of a camp in the whole state of Coahuila,” said Bob Ives, a member both of Tallowood and the camp's board of directors.

The camp began when local rancher Fransisco Lopez retired and donated his ranch to the Acuña church on one condition—that it be used to serve the cause of Christ.

The population in the area has exploded since the North American Free Trade Agreement. Census figures from 1990 placed the population at 56,000, but that had grown to more than 110,000 in 2000. Some estimate the population may have doubled since then.

Members of Tallowood Baptist Church have seen that growth firsthand, sending at least one group there to minister every year since 1993.

“Acuña has been a place of tremendous growth in the last 10 years,” Ives said. “It's a very fruitful field.”

Mission teams from the United States generally use the camp, which will sleep about 120 people, as a base for a variety of mission activities, including medical clinics, construction projects and evangelism.

Tallowood now is sending its missions teams a little further up the Rio Grande, but the church still supports the camp financially and through board members like Ives and Robert Armendariz.

The camp is playing an ever-enlarging role for Mexican churches as well, they said.

“The camp is very important because it fills a big need,” said Almendariz, vice chairman of the Getsemani board. “It gives the local churches a place

for retreats and training. Now churches as far away as Cancun use it as a place for their youth camps and retreats.”

The camp also is ministering to the nearby Santa Maria colonia. A medical clinic, the only health care available for miles around, opens one day a week. The clinic currently is housed in a room in one of the camp's buildings, but “we now have blueprints to build a medical clinic to house the ministry,” Armendariz said.

A benevolence ministry also provides poor families in the area with baby formula, clothing and food.

Plans call for the camp to house a theological school “to develop those leaders they are finding now,” Armendariz said. “I've been there from the beginning, so I can tell you about every brick.”

Jay Walthall, an industrial engineer from First Baptist Church in Edna, visits the camp to distribute about 1,500 pairs of glasses each year.

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A pediatrician works in the medical clinic housed in a room at Camp Getsemani.

While on a trip to Venezuela as a translator for a group of Alabama Baptists, he saw the need for vision care and bought instruments to test eyes and match them with correct glasses.

He receives the eyeglasses he distributes primarily from Lion's Club International and Southwestern Bell Retired Employees of Houston, which donate glasses for indigent people.

“My primary goal is sharing Jesus Christ with people,” he said. “I never examine eyes that I don't find out about their relationship with Jesus Christ. Examining eyes for me is a means of sharing Jesus Christ.”

Dexton Shores, director of the the Baptist General Convention of Texas River Ministry, said the camp will only increase in importance to Texas churches.

“Especially since 9/11, it's such an advantage for U.S. church groups to stay on the Mexico side of the Rio Grande. The wait at the bridge (to cross the border) can be so long it can really impact the time you have for ministry,” he said.

As a result, other encampments on the Mexican side of the river are beginning to sprout. Lake Pointe Church in Rockwall has begun a partnership for a similar facility in Piedras Negras.

“Getsemani's been a model that others have seen and said, 'We need to do this in our area,'" he noted.

For more information, visit [www.campgetsemani.org](http://www.campgetsemani.org).

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