

# Baptist pastor released after being kidnapped by cartel

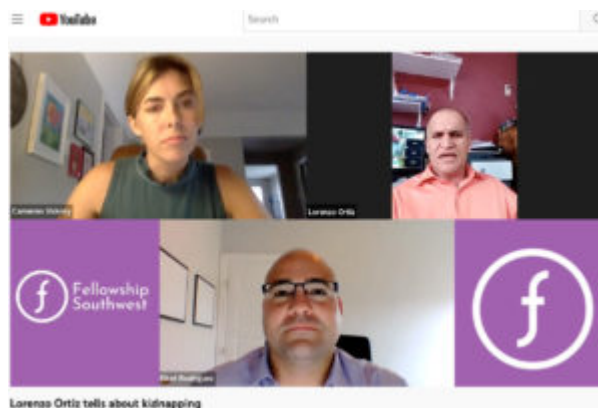
June 20, 2022

Baptist pastor Lorenzo Ortiz, who operates five shelters for migrants in northern Mexico, was released unharmed after being held hostage by a Mexican cartel for about 29 hours.

Ortiz, whose ministry to migrants receives monthly financial support from [Fellowship Southwest](#), was kidnapped along with 15 other hostages from one of his shelters about 6 p.m. on June 6 in Nuevo Laredo by a cartel operating in the region.

Initially, the cartel demanded \$40,000 for his release. Later, the kidnappers reduced the ransom demand to \$20,000.

However, when the ordeal ultimately ended about 11 p.m. the next evening, the cartel not only released him unharmed and without making any ransom payment, but also replaced two slashed tires on his van.



Ortiz described his experience in a 45-minute [recorded teleconference interview](#) with Cameron Vickrey, director of communication and development for Fellowship Southwest, and Elket Rodriguez, Cooperative Baptist Fellowship field representative to migrants and communities along the United States-Mexico border.

## **Interrogated by abductors**

In the interview, Ortiz said his abductors demanded to know how much he charged each migrant family he assisted in one of his shelters.

“I told them as a pastor, we do this for free,” Ortiz said.

When the cartel members and their boss refused to believe he was providing food, shelter and transportation to migrants without charging any fee, Ortiz challenged them to check his cell phone, which was in their possession.

“If you find just one person that I charged a dollar ... If you find one call where I was talking to somebody about money or any extortion, then you can pull the trigger if you want,” he recalled telling his captors.

Rodriguez explained the cartels profit from transporting migrants as part of their organized criminal activity, and they “own the turf.”

“It’s all a business to the cartel. They see humans as commodities,” he said.

The cartel that kidnapped Ortiz wanted to know if he was a competitor “cutting into [their] business,” he explained.

## **Rapid response by authorities**

Members of the cartel sent one of the shelters a photo of Ortiz’s van with slashed tires to prove they were holding him. At that point, members of his family began contacting authorities both in Mexico and the United States.

Because of the reputation Ortiz has earned and the respect he has gained for humanitarian work in northern Mexico, the Mexican National Guard, regional authorities and local law enforcement responded quickly—taking the cartel by surprise.

With a helicopter circling overhead and armed military personnel in the streets, the cartel—whose power is based on instilling fear in others—was frightened, Ortiz said.

Even a rival cartel—who had determined three years ago Ortiz was not profiting from his ministry to migrants—called to tell the kidnappers they didn't know who they were holding, and he needed to be released.

“The cartel was shaken. ... The cartel never felt so vulnerable,” Ortiz said, adding he felt at peace because he knew Christians were praying for him.

In a phone interview, Rodriguez said from the time he learned about Ortiz begin kidnapped, he prayed for the same outcome as in the story of Abram and Sarai in Egypt. In Genesis 12, God afflicted Pharaoh and his household so severely, the Egyptian ruler told the Hebrew couple to leave.

“That's exactly what happened,” he said. “They knew Lorenzo had to have the favor of God.”

## **‘A lamb among wolves’**

When Ortiz began ministering to migrants in Nuevo Laredo several years ago, he was aware of the cartel activity in the region. He said he knew he was working as “a lamb among wolves,” but he felt assured “God was going to be there.”

Ortiz said he saw the kidnapping as something God permitted “to test our faith, to test our hearts.”

Some of the migrants abducted from the shelter—who were held captive longer than Ortiz—told him after their release how they sang hymns and prayed together during the time they were held hostage.

“A cartel member saw all the guys singing and praying, and when he saw

that, he started crying,” he said, adding even the cartel was touched by the witness of faithful migrants.

As the cartel began releasing the migrants five at a time over the next several days, they arrived at the shelter where fellow Christians celebrated with them.

In coming days, Ortiz said, he will help them begin the process of applying for political asylum.

Ortiz recognizes the danger he faces ministering to migrants in Nuevo Laredo, and he acknowledged, “We may pay a price.”

However, he insisted, faithfulness to his calling requires him to meet needs in Christ’s name and to take the light of God’s love into dark places.

“We’re not supposed to run from the devil. The devil is supposed to run from us,” he said.