

Border pastors continue adapting ministry to immigrants

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Despite COVID-19, pastors who form the backbone of [Fellowship Southwest's ministry to immigrants](#) adapt to an ever-changing refugee flow and escalating needs of vulnerable people.



Lorenzo Ortiz leads El Buen Samaritano Migrante, a ministry that operates two shelters in Nuevo Laredo, plus one in Saltillo.

Lorenzo Ortiz comforts immigrants torn apart by trauma and despair in Nuevo Laredo, just across the Rio Grande from Laredo. Thousands of immigrant families languish under the Migrant Protection Protocols, widely known as the “Remain in Mexico” policy, which requires them to wait south of the border as they seek asylum in the United States.

Continuous postponement of their asylum hearings has caused immigrants who live in tent camps and shelters in Mexico to confront constant uncertainty.

“I’m working with moms who have risked their lives and their children’s lives, extorted by cartels, to cross to the United States,” Ortiz said. “Moms are crossing illegally or sending their children because the (border-crossing) bridges have not reopened, and immigration court hearings have not resumed due to the pandemic.”

Ortiz leads El Buen Samaritano Migrante, a ministry that operates two shelters in Nuevo Laredo, plus one in Saltillo, deeper into Mexico. In addition to protecting asylum seekers from Central and Latin America, the shelters also provide food to many Mexicans, who pass through their doors after being deported from the United States.

“We serve from 100 to 150 deported Mexicans every day,” Ortiz said. “Some of them have lived 30 to 40 years in the United States and are deported because they don’t have any documents.”

The U.S. Border Patrol increasingly is deporting undocumented immigrants who have lived in the United States for decades, he reported.

“They tell me they don’t know anyone in Mexico. They have families in the United States. They have U.S. citizen children, too,” Ortiz said.

Families are being separated, and cartels are extorting and kidnapping immigrants, especially at bus stops, he said. Fellowship Southwest has

supported Ortiz's ministry more than two years and recently helped purchase a van that enables him to keep immigrants safe and off the streets.

Working with immigrants in Matamoros

Near the Gulf of Mexico, Pastor Eleuterio González is trying to keep pace with U.S. Border Patrol's daily expulsions of immigrants through the Gateway International Bridge between Brownsville and Matamoros, Mexico.



Eleuterio González and his church, Iglesia Valle de Beraca, feed and protect more than 1,600 immigrants living in the Alberca Chavez shelter in Matamoros.

“They are deporting a lot of people—way too many people,” González said. “Mexican authorities have lost control of this.”

Supported by Fellowship Southwest, González and his church, Iglesia Valle de Beraca, feed and protect more than 1,600 immigrants living in the Alberca Chavez shelter in Matamoros. They also minister in camps, where thousands of refugees live in tents.

Recently, three children showed up unaccompanied, and González searched for their parents in the massive tent camp near downtown Matamoros that is home to more than 4,000 immigrants.

“Matamoros does not have the capacity to help all migrants at this rate,” he said. “People are tired. Coronavirus is spreading, and there is already emotional and physical exhaustion.”

Across the border from Matamoros, pastors Rogelio Pérez of Iglesia Bautista Capernaúm in Olmito and Carlos Navarro of Iglesia Bautista West Brownsville continue to assist González’s ministry by providing clothing, food and essential items. Pérez and Navarro have adapted their ministries to assist González in Matamoros, ever since the Mexican and U.S. governments agreed to stop nonessential crossings at the border in March.

“I just received bags with new personal hygiene items and masks, and I am going to send them to Eleuterio González in Matamoros,” said Pérez, who—with the help of Iglesia Bautista Capernaum—feeds about 600 people in Olmito and surrounding communities.

Navarro is ready to reopen IBWB’s immigrant respite center that was shut down by the city in March due to the coronavirus pandemic. Once the respite center opens, it will complement González’s ministry in Matamoros.

Shelters due to reopen in Piedras

Negras

Meanwhile, 320 miles northwest, Pastor Israel Rodríguez of Primera Iglesia Bautista in Piedras Negras plans to reopen a shelter—one of the church’s two shelters—he was forced to close in May. “There’s been an increase in migrants coming to Piedras Negras,” he said. “It seems to me that within the next few days, we are going to have to reopen the other shelter.”



Pastor Israel Rodríguez (center) of Primera Iglesia Bautista in Piedras Negras plans to reopen a shelter—one of the church’s two shelters—he was forced to close in May.

Rodríguez—who houses 48 people in the only open shelter in the city—said the government allows him to operate as long as he takes appropriate hygiene precautions to avoid the spread of COVID-19.

Several immigrants who live in the shelter have been baptized, he added.

“Last Sunday we baptized 14 people in our church, and five of them were migrants,” he said.

Network prepares for winter

About 500 miles northwest of Piedras Negras—across from El Paso in Ciudad Juarez—Pastor Rosalío Sosa is preparing for winter.

“We are installing heaters in the shelters,” Sosa reported. “With the heaters, we can move migrants to the outdoor tents in Palomas.”



Pastor Rosalío Sosa operates Red de Albergues para Migrantes—the Migrant Shelter Network—14 shelters in the state of Chihuahua, most of them in Ciudad Juarez, but also as far away as Palomas, about 100 more miles west into the desert.

Sosa operates Red de Albergues para Migrantes—the Migrant Shelter Network—14 shelters in the state of Chihuahua, most of them in Ciudad Juarez, but also as far away as Palomas, about 100 more miles west into the desert. Sosa plans to expand the Palomas shelter to deal with the increasing number of refugees there. Last month, the shelter served 1,436

immigrants expelled by the U.S. border patrol.

In Tijuana, close to the Pacific Ocean, Pastor Juvenal González labors to encourage and comfort pastors and immigrants alike.

“Due to the coronavirus, churches can’t meet at their full capacity,” González said. “The pastors don’t know what will happen to their congregations. But there is a new harvest—many Haitians.”

González—who oversees three shelters in Tijuana, where around 120 immigrants live—reported a church in Sinaloa comprised of 200 Haitians. “There are many Haitians being baptized,” he noted.

Despite spiritual victories, families from Central America who are under the “Remain in Mexico” policy are desperate, González said. “They are weary.”

Still, the need is so dire, González wants to do more. “It makes me sad that I can’t help more,” he lamented. “But I thank God we can be the hands and heart of Christ in the midst of all that’s happening.”

Elket Rodríguez, an attorney and minister, is the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship’s immigrant and refugee specialist. He lives on the U.S.-Mexico border, in Harlingen and works with CBF Advocacy, CBF Global Missions and Fellowship Southwest. He and Israel Rodríguez are not related; neither are Eleuterio González and Juvenal González.