

Litton joins California Baptists in migrant ministry on border

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SAN DIEGO, Calif. (BP)—Southern Baptist Convention President Ed Litton spent time in hands-on ministry alongside fellow Baptists as they served those crossing the border from Mexico into California.

After a week filled with preparation for the 2022 SBC annual meeting in Anaheim, Litton and other Baptist ministers helped distribute food and supplies to migrants seeking asylum from the United States government. Often, these migrants have traveled long distances on foot from as far away as Central America.

The migrant crisis increased significantly in 2019, and Baptists in border states like Texas and California have stepped up to serve those in need. Juvenal Gonzalez, formerly on staff at San Diego Baptist Association, is heavily involved with migrants ministry along the border.

Touching and transforming people

Litton said the day was emotionally “overwhelming.” However, he noted Baptists are “putting the gospel first and foremost” by ministering to a reality along the border.

“They are doing what the gospel does. It touches people in their brokenness, and it transforms lives,” he said. “It’s a glorious thing to see.”

With funds made possible by Fellowship Southwest, Gonzalez provides breakfast six days a week to migrants who have applied for asylum in the United States and are awaiting a response. Many stay in Tijuana, across the

border from San Diego, which is where Litton and the Southern Baptist group worked.

Alan Cross is the pastor of Petaluma Valley Baptist Church in Petaluma, Calif., and was among the pastors serving this week. He said Litton's work on Tuesday lends support to the 2022 SBC annual meeting theme Litton unveiled earlier in the week.

"To hear Dr. Litton speak about Jesus being the center of our faith on Tuesday, and then watching him the next day handing out supplies and minister to migrants ... he is putting hands and feet to what he was saying the day before," Cross said.

As a Southern Baptist pastor in California, Cross said a lot of the Hollywood glitz and glamour stereotypes are not relevant to the environments the state's churches work in. Instead, ministry in California is about connecting with people by serving and sharing the Gospel.

"You get a sense that California pastors really roll up their sleeves and get to work," Cross said. "Most of them are not pastors of big churches, but they are connected with their communities and they love their communities."

'Welcome the sojourner'

Cross said when he asked Mexican Baptist pastors what enables them to sacrifice so much to serve those in need, they almost didn't understand the question. Their reaction seemed to say, "That's just what Christians are supposed to do."

Cross said all Christians should reflect this attitude of welcoming the stranger, especially considering recent news out of Afghanistan.

"The way that we treat the sojourner reflects our understanding of God's

love and how we're supposed to love one other," Cross said. "Southern Baptists have an incredible opportunity to minister to migrants at the border and to refugees who come to us. We don't need to miss that opportunity, and all of us together need to welcome the sojourner with the love of Christ. When we do that, we display the gospel to the whole world."

Litton echoed this sentiment on the importance of ministering to those who are coming to the United States as migrants.

"We send missionaries to the nations, but it looks like God is sending the nations to us," Litton said. "The Bible is very clear on how we are to treat the stranger, and they're not to be strangers to us. We're to receive them, and I think Southern Baptists at our best recognize this. I can't think of a better way for someone to come into this country than to come having Christ transform their hearts in the process."

Litton said one reason he desires Southern Baptists to come to next June's annual meeting in Anaheim is to see the evidence of God working there and find ways to join in ministry.

"I think all Southern Baptists need to come to Anaheim, because we need to see what God's already doing here in church planting, in established churches and in revitalization," Litton said.

"This is a challenging environment, and they've crossed some bridges, and they are doing things here under less favorable circumstances that we need to see. And we need to become a part of it."

Editor's Note: This article was originally posted Aug. 23. It was edited Aug. 26 to clarify some information, particularly regarding the involvement of Fellowship Southwest.