

New Mexico Baptists continue to aid migrants

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ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. (BP) —Serving asylum-seeking migrants is as simple as “a cup of cold water in Jesus’ name” said Frieda Adams, a former 20-year veteran Southern Baptist missionary and current coordinator for medical personnel in New Mexico’s Doña Ana County.

Adams is one of many Baptists in New Mexico providing humanitarian assistance to asylum-seeking migrants vetted and released by United States Customs and Border Patrol agents, on their way to approved immigration sponsors in other parts of the country.

In the nearly three months since U.S. Customs and Border Protection began releasing asylum-seeking migrants in the border state, at least eight churches affiliated with the Baptist Convention of New Mexico have provided, or are currently providing, assistance to migrants in three communities—Albuquerque, Deming and Las Cruces.

Disaster relief volunteers mobilized

On March 14, following a meeting with several local faith-based ministries and representatives from the City of Albuquerque’s Emergency Management Office, New Mexico Baptist Disaster Relief Director Ira Shelton, began mobilizing volunteers to respond to the needs of migrants.

Between March 14 and 26, the disaster relief volunteers prepared and distributed approximately 320 meals. Sandia Baptist Church in Albuquerque allowed Baptist disaster relief workers to use their commercial grade kitchen to prepare those meals.

Shelton, citing Matthew 25, said if New Mexico Baptists “can bring hope, help and healing, then that’s what we need to do.”

On April 22, about 30 members of First Baptist Church of West Albuquerque served lunch to migrants in Rio Rancho, an Albuquerque suburb.

The church’s pastor, Stephen Baum, said the congregation’s response is not political, but rather, the priority is to “put food in hungry bellies and do that in the name of Christ and just show the love of Jesus to these folks.”

New Mexico Baptist disaster relief provided equipment for the meal, while the church covered the cost of the food.

‘An opportunity to be light to our neighbors’

In mid-April, Calvary Baptist Church in Las Cruces partnered with Peace Lutheran Church and other local faith-based organizations to feed and house asylum seekers in their community. Dennis Garcia, a North American Mission Board church planting catalyst for southern New Mexico, and a member of Calvary, said in April that the situation provides “an opportunity to be light to our neighbors.”

“They may not be our physical, tangible neighbors for long, but during the time that they are in our city, they are the people God is bringing, and we have an opportunity to be a tangible expression of God’s love and grace and mercy in their lives,” Garcia said.

Adams, who works closely with Calvary, said that she was “extremely grateful” for the church’s efforts, adding that serving migrants is “about obeying Matthew 25. It’s about being the hands and feet of Jesus.”

Garcia wrote on July 3: "Right now the number of families coming to Las Cruces (is) much lower than just a few weeks ago. This is good in the sense that aid workers have a more manageable situation. However, it also means these families are being held at the federal detention centers longer."

Another church member is working to schedule and coordinate medical care for shelters in the city.

As of July 3, Garcia said he is "working with Border Servant Corps to assist with systems development and strategic planning." Border Service Corps is a Las Cruces-based nonprofit organization that "promotes and demonstrates justice, kindness, and humility through the exploration of community, simplicity, social justice, and spirituality in the U.S. and Mexico border region," according to its website.

'It's never wrong to show compassion'

During the Baptist Convention of New Mexico's April 15 State Mission Board meeting in Albuquerque, Mason Davis, pastor of Bethel Baptist Church, Deming, encouraged board members and convention personnel to see the current crisis as an opportunity to share the gospel with the nations, whom God has brought to New Mexico.

On May 13, First Baptist Church and Bethel Baptist Church in Deming began partnering to provide hot meals and sack lunches to migrants temporarily housed in the city. Migrants are currently being held at the Southwestern New Mexico State Fairgrounds as well as a hangar at a nearby non-operational airport. Robert Hamilton, pastor of First Baptist Deming, said as of July 1, the church had distributed more than 1,000 sack lunches to migrants.

Hamilton said even though the situation is not ideal, his congregation has responded with compassion. He added that he has been vocal from the

pulpit about separating the political from the personal and showing love to those in need. Hamilton, who is currently preaching through the Gospel of Luke, said that in studying Jesus' teachings, he has emphasized that "it's never wrong to show compassion, and often that's the avenue that we have to then share the gospel."

After speaking with Hamilton and Davis, Connie Dixon, New Mexico state director for Woman's Missionary Union, contacted churches in the state's Eastern Baptist Association, asking for supply donations. Within 48 hours, Dixon was able to completely fill a trailer with donated items, including food, bedding and shoes. On May 21, she drove the items to the fairgrounds in Deming and transferred them to municipal officials for distribution.

Dixon noted that the national WMU current social emphasis is on refugees, adding that "Deming would be a great place to go" for anyone looking to plan a mission trip over the summer.

"We're called to minister to them, and what better place to do that than here?" she asked.

Two churches in Eastern Baptist Association—Calvary Baptist Church and Emmanuel Baptist Church, both in Portales—are gathering additional supplies at Dixon's request and plan to deliver them to Deming. Calvary also is collecting a financial offering to assist efforts in Deming.

With fewer migrants entering Las Cruces, members of Calvary Las Cruces have shifted some of their efforts to the situation in Deming. According to Garcia, as of July 3, the church is packing hygiene kits and sending them to one of the facilities in Deming, about 60 miles east of Las Cruces.

Many of those seeking asylum are acting in accordance with current United States asylum laws. According to Scott Wilson, Missions Mobilization Team leader with New Mexico Baptists, asylum-seeking migrants "are vetted, have ankle monitors and sponsors somewhere in the U.S." Asylum seekers

typically spend less than 48 hours in their host city before boarding a bus or plane to connect with their sponsors, Adams noted.

Roger Ebner, director of the City of Albuquerque's Office of Emergency Management, said as of July 2, the city has received and assisted around 4,000 asylum seekers this year.

Udell Vigil, communications director for the City of Las Cruces, said that between April 12 and July 1, "12,311 asylum seekers have been brought to Las Cruces by U.S. Border Patrol. We are averaging 150 daily, which is down from the 200 to 250 daily from two weeks ago."

Close to 7,000 migrants have been brought to the city since May 11, according to the *Deming Headlight*.