

Some Baptists view caravan as ministry opportunity

November 6, 2018

While some politicians in the United States have referred to the caravan of Central American immigrants traveling toward the nation's southern border as an "invasion," some Baptists in Mexico and South Texas view the situation as a ministry opportunity.



Natanael Ramírez Villegas (third from left), pastor of Primera Iglesia Bautista Bethel in Santo Domingo, is pictured with a group of immigrants from Central America. (Photo courtesy of Natanael Ramírez)

Natanael Ramírez Villegas, pastor of Primera Iglesia Bautista Bethel in Santo Domingo, a community near the Mexico/Guatemala border, began preparing for a ministry to immigrants last December.

By the end of May of this year, his congregation and several other churches

in the Convención Regional Bautista Costa de Chiapas—a regional Baptist association in southern Mexico—were offering food and spiritual care to immigrants passing through Tapachula. The churches focused their limited resources on providing aid to women, mothers with children, senior adults and people with disabilities, Ramírez explained.

“Everything begins with the call Jesus gave us to go to the nations, but now they are coming to us,” he said.

Ministry to the immigrants has opened the eyes of the churches that are participating in it, he said. He recalled one young girl who said, “They are walking right next to us, and now it is the right time to share the gospel with them and offer something for them to continue their journey.”

Fear of violence prompts migration

Although his interaction with immigrants is brief, Ramírez said, he has heard and seen why they leave their homes.



Families from Central America make a perilous journey north to escape

violence and poverty in their homelands. (Photo courtesy of Natanael Ramírez)

“I met a young woman who had made plans to leave home with her brother, but the day I met her she had just heard her brother was unable to leave Honduras and was killed by a gang,” Ramírez said.

Wars, drug violence, climate change, persecution and lack of opportunity are among the factors that explain why families leave their home countries, said Danny Carroll, professor of Old Testament at Wheaton College and author of *Christians at the Border: Immigration, the Church, and the Bible*.

“We need to put this into a global perspective, because the same kind of desperate move that we’re seeing coming out of Honduras is the same kind of thing we’re seeing coming out of Sudan or Syria,” Carroll said.

Drug violence has permeated all aspects of society, and just like it happened in Colombia, the governments of Honduras and Guatemala have been infiltrated by the drug cartels, Carroll noted.

Those are some of the reasons driving families to take such desperate measures and walk as far as they have walked, he explained.

“What they are doing is fleeing the violence of lower-income neighborhoods, where these gangs will house, and trying to preserve the lives of their children,” he said.

Caring for others

Although Mexican Baptist churches have needs of their own, Ramírez said, their limitations cannot prevent them from caring for others who are

running for their lives.



Mexican Baptist churches serve meals to Central American immigrants. (Photo courtesy of Natanael Ramírez)

“We have needs, but we also know we can give some kind of help,” he said. “At least in the spiritual aspect we can help.”

Immigration has changed the way churches look at the world around them, Ramírez explained. Now, his church and other congregations in the regional association want to form their own nonprofit organization to continue the mission they are doing now on an ongoing basis, he said.

They hope Proyecto de Siembra de Iglesia Inmigrante (Project Immigrant Church Start) will continue to feed immigrants every day, as well as grow to offer a place for them to rest and shower.

To help those who cannot continue the journey, the churches hope to form partnerships so they can help people find jobs in the area and permanently live there, Ramírez said.

“We know God has called us to use what we have to help others on their journey.”

Laredo pastor works with Mexican Baptists

Before the caravans began, [Lorenzo Ortiz](#), pastor of Iglesia Bautista Emanuel in Laredo already was working with immigrants who crossed from Nuevo Laredo into Texas.

His ministry began with Cubans who came seeking asylum. It has changed to include immigrants from Venezuela and Africa, and it may soon include Central American asylum-seekers.



Lorenzo Ortiz, pastor of of Iglesia Bautista Emanuel in Laredo, believes God has called him to minister to immigrants and deportees. (Photo / Isa Torres)

Ortiz approached Adolfo Salazar, president of the National Baptist Convention of Mexico, suggesting that Baptist churches in Mexico work cooperatively to meet the needs of immigrants making their way toward the United States/Mexico border.

The National Baptist Convention of Mexico posted a statement on [Facebook](#) calling its churches to share the gospel with immigrants—now mostly from Central America— and donate articles of clothing, shoes, umbrellas, first

aid items and over-the-counter medicine.

The convention also encouraged churches to use their facilities to prepare and offer healthy foods to immigrants. To meet spiritual needs, the convention urged churches to distribute Bibles, as well.

“God has the power to move the borders of the world and bring the nations closer to the knowledge of the gospel. Let us not waste this great opportunity to share the plan of salvation in Christ,” the convention’s social media post said.

Regional Baptist conventions in the north and in the south of Mexico are mobilizing to minister to immigrants, Ortiz said. Even so, Ortiz said, more churches and ministries must join this ministry “since this work does not belong to only one church.”

“This requires the whole Christian body,” Ortiz said.

Lengthy process

Although the caravan is at least 700 miles from Nuevo Laredo, Ortiz already has contacted the city government to determine the role of the church and the state in response. The government will provide a shelter for immigrants, while churches will feed them and help with other resources like clothing and medicine, he said.

Jacinta Ma, policy and advocacy director of the National Immigration Forum, explained immigrants have created an informal system in which they get in line and write down the name of an individual along with his or her family members. Once numbers are assigned to each individual, they can find shelter somewhere near the border, she said. When their number eventually is called, they must be ready to present themselves to a Customs and Border Protection officer.



Members of a caravan from Central America rest in Mexico City. (Photo courtesy of Natanael Ramírez)

The border patrol officer questions applicants to assess whether they are qualified to seek asylum, based on whether they face a “credible fear” of violence or persecution in their country.

“If they pass the initial screening with the border patrol, then they are referred to a United States Citizenship and Immigration Services asylum officer, who will make a ‘credible fear’ screening and determination about whether they are eligible for asylum,” Ma said.

The process can take anywhere from six months to two years, Ma noted. About 92,000 people took the initial “credible fear” test in the past year. Between 60 percent and 80 percent initially were referred forward, but only 20 percent received asylum, Ma said.

The arrival of immigrants at the border—and opportunity to minister to them as they wait there—all are part of God at work, Ortiz maintained. More people have been reached for Christ through ministry to immigrants than in the churches or through other ministries, he said.

“Not only as conventions, churches, or ministries, but as individuals we have been transformed because we have seen how God changes lives through this immigration phenomenon,” Ortiz said.

If some of the people in the caravan are able to enter the United States, Ortiz is part of a coalition that be there to help them. To read a related story about the coalition, click [here](#).