

# Follow God's call at any age, refugee advocate urges

October 18, 2024

WAXAHACHIE—Carla Cochrane said she first felt a call to learn more about asylum seekers in May 2019.

She said it was a time when the news was paying quite a bit of attention to the increase of asylum seekers at the southern border.

“And for some reason, I remember that caught my mind,” she said, and she began to study and learn about it.

Her church, The Avenue Church in Waxahachie, was doing a Bible study on Gideon, Cochrane explained.

“I remember thinking, ‘What do I have in common with Gideon?’” she recalled.

When they finished the study, Cochrane said, “It was like, I felt God saying: ‘This is what I want you to do. You are to advocate on their behalf.’”

## God opens doors



The children of Haitian asylum seekers gather for small toys and coloring materials in Reynosa. (Courtesy Photo)

Though she was in her late 50s with grown children and grandchildren, once she said “yes” to God, and began to research and learn about refugee ministry, God began opening doors, Cochrane said.

“That’s why I say, ‘Just say yes [to God],’” she explained, noting no matter how old someone is when God calls, he will use and bless those who say “yes” and are faithful.

Cochrane visited the border for the first time in November 2019. She visited refugee camps in Reynosa and Matamoros filled with asylum seekers. Her mission friend Sheri Short, who she credits for helping her turn the calling to action, accompanied Cochrane on this trip.

The women met migrants who were waiting for an opportunity to present themselves for asylum at ports of entry in McAllen and Brownsville. They went into Mexico with missionaries from [Texas Baptists River Ministry](#),

who took them to the migrant camps in Reynosa and Matamoros.

God continued to open doors, Cochrane said. And, she was able to return to those same camps in November 2020.

When Cochrane grew up in a Fundamental Baptist church in “small town Texas,” she explained, caring for immigrants wasn’t a focus of the church in that community.

She has stayed in “small town Texas” as an adult, so her environment has not shifted much in its lack of commitment to refugee ministry. She explained this has been one of the hardest things she’s faced in following this calling.

Cochrane thought when God gave her the heart for this ministry, the people she loves would be excited for her to have found her place in God’s mission, but that is not what she experienced.

## **Finding a team**

While her family and friends support her involvement, their understanding of why it matters so much to her has a limit. So, she was glad to find a community, [Women of Welcome](#), of like-minded women devoted to understanding God’s heart for immigrants.

It was in this community on Facebook where in 2021 she met a sister who would play an important role in the ways that God was leading her, Alma Ruth, founder and director of [Practice Mercy Foundation](#).



Alma Ruth (front), Carla Cochrane (right holding the child) and friends visit asylum seekers at Reynosa, Mexico in May 2023. (Courtesy Photo)

Cochrane began to learn about Ruth's mission work at the border through her nonprofit. And in May 2022, she joined Practice Mercy for an immersion trip to visit [Senda De Vida refugee shelter](#) in Reynosa.

Then in July 2022 she returned to the border with a mission group from her church. The group met Ruth on one of the days. Ruth took them on a boat tour of the Rio Grande River, where they saw a portion of the border wall that separates the United States and Mexico.

She and Ruth stayed in close touch, and in October 2022, Cochrane became a board member for Practice Mercy Foundation, serving as treasurer until January 2024.

During that time, an in-person board meeting in McAllen provided an opportunity to help with an eyeglass clinic at a Haitian camp in Reynosa in December 2023.

On that same visit, Cochrane met a [young Russian pastor](#) and his family

staying in Reynosa, who had contacted Ruth for help when they fled Russia because their advocacy against the war in Ukraine made them targets.

## God appointments



Alma Ruth (left) intersects with a Haitian family that a refugee camp in Reynosa. (Courtesy Photo)

One evening, the group tagged along with a local reporter. Spending time with him allowed the group to interact with asylum seekers who crossed over “and turned themselves in to Border Patrol for a chance to claim asylum.”

Cochrane said about 50 individuals crossed the border that evening.

“There were teenagers, families, mothers and their children, unaccompanied siblings and several older men and women,” she said.

“They were processed to be taken to a detention center by bus. Border Patrol allowed us to speak with them, give them water and snacks, blankets

and to pray over them.”

The group felt “this was a moment only God could have orchestrated, for us to have this amazing experience,” Cochrane recalled.

Cochrane went on two additional immersion trips with Practice Mercy in 2023. In May, they visited a Haitian camp in Reynosa, where they spent most of their time with the children. Then in September, they went to a refugee camp in Matamoros, where they conducted an eyeglass clinic, spent time with the children and provided personal hygiene items for the women.

“This trip was life changing for me,” Cochrane recalled, “because God had it planned out to the smallest detail.”

She explained her job was to put lenses into eyeglass frames, and she was struggling a little to get them to go in.

## **The world’s best hug**

Juan, a 15-year-old from Venezuela, came and stood beside her to help with the glasses.

“He didn’t speak English, and I don’t speak Spanish. But when God is in the middle of it, all that really doesn’t matter,” Cochrane observed.

Juan stuck around helping for about three hours, Cochrane wondering all the while, “Why would this teen boy want to spend so much time with a 61-year-old woman?”

After the eyeglass clinic concluded an interpreter came over, so she learned more about Juan.

Cochrane learned he and his 18-year-old brother were both in the camp “awaiting an appointment, through the [CBP app](#), to present themselves for

asylum at the port of entry.”

They were hoping to make it to their father, who was in New York. Their mother remained in Columbia.



Carla Cochrane hugs Juan.  
(Courtesy Photo)

Jaun told her he missed his mom. But the saddest thing for him was leaving his grandparents in Venezuela, because he likely would never get to see them again.

“It was at that moment that I knew exactly why God had brought me to this camp at this day and time” Cochrane said. Juan needed a grandmother.

“I asked if I could hug him, and that embrace will be a wonderful memory for me the rest of my life. I attempted to release our hug three times before he finally let go of me. Only God!”

Cochrane said she will continue to visit the border to serve, walk alongside and hear stories from asylum seekers to advocate on their behalf, for as long as God makes it possible.

“I always tell others that the greatest take-away for me is that God has allowed me to see others through the eyes of Jesus, and therefore my heart is forever changed.

“He has filled it with so much love, compassion and joy.”

And, she said she heard from Juan’s dad. Juan was in New York City. Both boys made it to asylum and to family.