

# Hispanic evangelical group offers to help migrant children

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—The head of the largest Hispanic evangelical Christian network in the United States announced it will offer to work with the Trump administration to provide resources and shelter to migrant children crossing the U.S.-Mexico border.

Speaking during a call with reporters July 1, Samuel Rodriguez, president of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference, said his organization plans to launch a campaign to offer aid to immigrant children held in detention centers at the border.

The effort, which organizers are calling the “For His Children” campaign, will involve sending “shipments and cargo and truckloads of resources to the border,” including shoes, clothing and hygiene products, Rodriguez said.



Samuel Rodriguez

“We have boots on the ground literally now working with our current administration in addressing some of the needs of these children coming

over,” he said.

When asked if the campaign would involve churches providing shelter or foster homes for migrant children crossing the U.S.-Mexico border, Rodriguez said yes.

“That’s part of what we have in the rollout of the campaign,” he said. “It’s part of it.”

## **Details to be worked out**

It was not immediately clear how many—or which—children the group might be able to take in. No details were available about what kind of government approval the process would require. It also was not clear whether the children would be housed just in churches or also in homes.

The Kairos Company, the communications firm that organized the call, said churches who participate in the program plan to offer housing to children who otherwise would end up in detention centers, but noted they have not yet secured approval from the U.S. government to do so.

“In the meantime, the churches will provide the necessary basic necessities, and we are opening up churches to accommodate just in case the detention centers cannot hold the children or their families,” a spokesperson said in an email. “The church becomes a temporary housing facility for those seeking asylum or coming over the border undocumented and were captured in the process.”

The spokesperson also noted that the initiative will be led by the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference, but not limited to their network.

When asked about the potential program, the U.S. State Department deferred to the Department of Homeland Security, who also did not immediately respond. The U.S. Department of Health and Human

Services—which assists with similar programs—also did not immediately respond to request for comment.

Rodriguez said For His Children is “revamping” a previous partnership with the humanitarian organization Convoy of Hope. That partnership began in July 2014 when unaccompanied children arrived in the U.S. under former President Obama.

“Our preferable choice is for people to come here legally, not illegally. We want to stop all illegal immigration for a number of reasons, including the humanitarian reason. My heart broke when I saw these kids. I don’t want these kids to be in danger or to suffer at all,” Rodriguez said.

“If they do come here, we want to be a blessing to them. We really want to help them.”

Rodriguez listed as potential partners Gus Reyes, director of the Baptist General Convention of Texas’ Christian Life Commission, and Eli Bonilla, lead pastor at Bethel Christian Church in Orlando, Florida.



Gus Reyes

“We are committed to the mandate of Matthew 25, and we care about children and those who are most vulnerable,” Reyes said. Texas Baptists hold a variety of opinions about immigration policies but share a common commitment to ministering to people in need, he added,

Texas Baptist churches already are involved in a [variety of ministries](#) to help vulnerable immigrant children and their families when they are released from detention, Reyes noted, as well as working with churches in northern Mexico to help families waiting to apply for asylum.

## **Rodriguez: ‘Summer camp environment’**

Rodriguez asserted he saw something “drastically different from the stories I’ve been hearing in our national discourse” when he requested a visit to a detention facility last week in El Paso.

“I was shocked at the misinformation of the crisis at the border,” Rodriguez said.

He and a delegation of pastors from the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference had full access to the facility, which they toured for at least an hour, he said.

It appeared to be a “summer camp environment” where children had television and snacks and cordial relationships with guards, Rodriguez said. No one was sleeping on floors or cement, and storage areas were full of clothing and hygiene products.

Rodriguez said guards emphatically told him they had not altered the center for the visit but acknowledged he was not allowed to speak with the children.

James Dobson, the founder of Focus on the Family, similarly grabbed headlines last week with a newsletter documenting his visit to the border at McAllen, alleging “the media and leftist politicians have not been truthful about what is going on there.”

Both Rodriguez and Dobson are represented by The Kairos Company.

## Evangelical Immigration Table

The Evangelical Immigration Table also visited the U.S.-Mexico border in late June, as revelations about the dire conditions of children within detention centers made the news. Its delegation included the National Association of Evangelicals President Leith Anderson and World Relief President Scott Arbeiter, as well as representatives of Bethany Christian Services, the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities and the Assemblies of God.

The National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference is a member of the Evangelical Immigration Table.

Afterward, the Evangelical Immigration Table sent a letter addressed to President Trump, Vice President Mike Pence, Senate Leader Mitch McConnell, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and members of Congress.

That letter asks for immediate funding for border facilities, urges the United States to respect its own laws regarding asylum seekers and expressed concern about Trump's so-called "Remain in Mexico" program.

In a recorded press call about the letter, Anderson said there are churches throughout the United States that are "eager to welcome families and provide for them."

"We just need federal policies that would allow them to be able to do that," he said.

Anderson also asked Congress to "find a bipartisan solution to this tragic situation."

One issue preventing churches and faith-based agencies from helping

asylum seekers is the “Remain in Mexico” program, which is sending asylum seekers back over the border to Mexico while they wait for their cases to be heard in U.S. immigration court, according to Matthew Soerens, national coordinator of the Evangelical Immigration Table and U.S. director of church mobilization for World Relief.

Another issue is that the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has run out of resources to place children with agencies like Bethany Christian Services that are authorized to provide foster care for children until they can be reunited with family, Soerens said.

Also, churches would need government approval and oversight to take in children. Not just anyone can show up and offer to foster a migrant child who has been separated from his or her family at the border, he confirmed—and that’s “for good reason.”

He added, “You have to protect children.”