

Association and church a peaceful presence on the border

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HENRIETTA (BP)—Robert Blackmon still can see the young couple. They were in their 20s and sat on metal chairs, a baby in the mother's lap. After a journey of who-knows-how-long, they worked to change the child's diaper.

"It was something we all do normally as a part of being parents," said Blackmon, himself a father of two toddlers. "They were there, and then they were gone."

The couple was among the hundreds receiving help from Blackmon, pastor of Bluegrove Baptist Church in Henrietta, and others from Wichita Archer Clay Baptist Association last year on a mission trip to the U.S.-Mexico border at Del Rio.

In addition to assisting with paperwork and food distribution, the group also provided needed items such as diapers and wipes or built playground equipment for the restless children of families waiting to be processed.

Gospel encounters have come through tracts and New Testaments in Spanish. That has spurred several at Bluegrove to begin learning the language through apps like Duolingo, Blackmon said.

"We knew it would be a lot more helpful if we knew how to talk to people. There were missed opportunities because we couldn't communicate clearly," said the pastor, who feels like he's back to the level he had in Spanish 3 at Burkburnett High, north of Wichita Falls.

Strong call to share the gospel

About a year ago it became clear to Jim Pennington, a deacon at Joy Baptist Church, that the Wichita Archer Clay Baptist Association should minister to people gathering at the border. Situated in Northwest Texas cattle country, most of the association's 67 churches are in rural settings with modest attendance. But the call to share the gospel with those seeking a better life was clear. And, it was strong.



In addition to serving as a Texas Baptists' River Ministry missionary and as associate pastor for missions and youth at City Church in Del Rio, Shon Young chairs the Val Verde Border Humanitarian Coalition, helping to meet the needs of immigrant families.

Pennington, 70, died during the summer. Three months after his death, though, members from his church and Bluegrove made the six-hour trip to Del Rio that August.

There, they assisted with day-to-day operations of the [Val Verde Border Humanitarian Coalition](#) in everything from paperwork to making 1,021 (they counted) peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches for some 500 refugees, mostly Haitian, who had gathered under the International Bridge. Churches in the association also donated backpacks filled with hygiene items and other basic necessities.

[Shon Young](#), associate pastor of missions and youth at City Church Del Rio, facilitated the trips in his role as a [River Ministry](#) missionary for the Baptist

General Convention of Texas.

“Just because immigration isn’t in the news doesn’t mean the work isn’t happening,” he said. “These folks hopped in and filled needs while meeting people where they’re at. A lot of English-speaking churches wonder how they can get involved and there’s always a way.”



Thousands of Haitians camp beneath a Del Rio bridge. At the request of U.S. Border Patrol, City Church in Del Rio is leading an effort to provide sandwiches on a daily basis. (Photo courtesy of Matt Mayberry)

Approximately 150 men, women and children pass through the Del Rio processing center each day. People are tired; kids get hungry and restless. Last year, Young and others served more than 22,000 people through Del Rio. U.S. Border Patrol asked for help, so churches provided more than 25,000 sandwiches.

The Del Rio entry point [made news last September](#) when more than 9,000 refugees, mostly Haitian, awaited entry into the U.S. That crowd long since had dispersed when another team from the association returned in December, but work focused on strengthening infrastructure for similar situations.

For instance, Blackmon and others dug a 100-foot-long trench to lay a water line for a shower area. It was a notable upgrade from the previous supply source—a garden hose snaking its way across the yard and parking lot.

During a third visit early this month, a group of 14 from Bluegrove Baptist spent most of their time assembling playground equipment. They also rebuilt platforms for outdoor sinks and painted an awning.

Supporting one trip per month

The church has since committed in its budget to support one trip a month throughout 2022 for the border ministry. They typically leave on Sunday after church, with full workdays taking place Monday and Tuesday before returning on Wednesday. Church members also are going through the process of renewing their passports in order to be more involved with ministry opportunities across the border.

Blackmon is familiar with the type of flexibility required for the ministry. An illness cut short his career as an offensive lineman for LSU. However, it also sped up the timeline for a calling into the ministry felt since he was 15.

He enrolled at Leavell College in 2011 and planted a church a year later. Then he served as a youth minister in Louisiana and his hometown of Burkburnett. In July 2018, he became the lead pastor at Bluegrove a week before his 26th birthday.

“Our town has only about 125 people,” said Blackmon, who graduated from New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary in 2020. “Our heart for this was born out of the Great Commandment and Great Commission.”

They also hear the stories of others. A young man from Haiti was a math teacher in his country, and he wants the same role in an American school. A Venezuelan lay pastor talked about his goal of reaching Salt Lake City to help in a Baptist church.

There are also the heartbreaking situations.

“Recently a mother and daughter were trying to cross the river and the

daughter, 7 years old, drowned,” Young said. “I’ve seen that over the years, and you never forget it. We’re there to show them the hope we have in Christ at that time of loss.”

The presence of “church people” helps lower anxiety, he added. Help is secured and a witness given.

The interaction blesses in both ways, Blackmon testified.

“You can tell when people show up that they’re not sure what kind of place they’re coming to, as they’ve been to all kinds of facilities,” he said. “After a while, they relax and start to smile. When our people see that, it becomes infectious.”