

Baptists join Obama in meeting on child immigrant crisis

July 10, 2014

DALLAS—Texas Baptists joined other religious leaders and state and local officials at a meeting with President Barack Obama to discuss the humanitarian crisis caused by a surge of unaccompanied minor immigrants from Central America.

Chris Liebrum, who leads the Baptist General Convention of Texas' [disaster recovery program](#), and Kevin Dinnin, president of [Baptist Child & Family Services](#), a BGCT-related agency providing care for children housed at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, participated in the July 9 meeting.



Border Patrol agents

from Eagle Pass rescue a woman and her daughter from the Rio Grande River. The El Salvador citizens were struggling to stay afloat when spotted by agents, who deployed flotation devices and pulled them from the water. (Photo by Border Patrol Agent Carl Nagy)Others included Arne Nelson, president of Catholic Charities of Dallas; Gov. Rick Perry; Rep. Eddie

Bernice Johnson, D-Dallas; Dallas County Judge Clay Jenkins, who previously had volunteered the county to house up to 2,000 immigrant children; the mayors of Dallas and Grand Prairie, and county and state officials.

Albert Reyes, president of [Buckner International](#) and a leader in the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference, was invited to the meeting but was traveling in Peru. Buckner has worked in Latin America more than a decade, including longstanding ministry in Guatemala, home to many of the immigrant children.

Obama held the meeting in Dallas one day after he asked Congress for \$3.7 billion in emergency spending for the crisis along the Texas/Mexico border. Border Patrol has apprehended more than 50,000 unaccompanied minors so far this year, many of them fleeing violence in Central America.

'Back and forth' dialogue

Liebrum characterized the meeting as a genuine roundtable discussion with "quite a bit of back and forth" dialogue, noting Obama called on each person to ask for his or her ideas.

Liebrum commented he hoped everyone would consider what it would be like to be a 4-year-old child in Guatemala whose parents decide he should risk making a journey to the United States.

"Years from now, when he is grown, I hope he will look back on this experience and think, 'The Americans treated me with kindness and with respect.' From a Christian standpoint, I hope he will say: 'They treated me in a godly way. They treated me the way Christ would have treated me,'" he said.

In addressing reporters after the meeting, Obama commended Dallas-area officials for offering to make sites available to house immigrant children.

"And I indicated in hearing the stories of churches that are prepared to not just make donations but send volunteers to help construct some of these facilities or fix them up, and their willingness to volunteer in providing care and assistance—I told them, 'thank you,' because it confirmed what I think we all know, which is the American people are an incredibly compassionate people, and when we see a child in need, we want to care for them," he said.

Coordinating services in Dallas

A few days before the roundtable meeting with Obama, Dallas-area religious leaders met with Jenkins about his offer to shelter immigrant children in Dallas County. Participants who gathered to discuss ways the faith community could respond included David Hardage, BGCT executive director; Jana Jackson, director of family and community ministries for [Dallas Baptist Association](#); Jeff Jones, vice president of spiritual development for Buckner International; and Dan Malone, general counsel for [Dallas Baptist University](#).

"This is an unfortunate, even awful, situation for everyone," Hardage said. "So much of what has happened and is happening is out of our control. What we can control is our response to human need. We will try to be the hands and feet of Jesus to those in need."

BGCT President Jeff Johnson praised Texas Baptists for seeking ways to minister to children in crisis. Texas Baptist Men worked with the Border Patrol about two weeks to provide child care, showers and laundry service for underage undocumented immigrants detained in Brownsville until government contractors assumed the responsibility. TBM volunteers washed more than 1,200 loads of laundry and made available about 1,800 showers for the children at Fort Brown. Recently, TBM volunteers at Calvary Baptist Church in McAllen also assisted with laundry, and TBM leaders have stated their willingness to meet ongoing needs as requested.

In a column he wrote for the *Baptist Standard*, Johnson recounted a conversation with a man who prayed, “God, help us and our nation out of this immigration crisis.”

Johnson, pastor of First Baptist Church in Commerce, told the man rather than seeking to pray their way out of a crisis, he hopes Christians—and Texas Baptists in particular—will “pray our way in” to an opportunity for ministry.

“Have you ever thought maybe this immigration crisis is giving Texas Baptists an opportunity to glorify God on a national stage?” he wrote.

However, not all national attention directed toward Texas Baptists has been positive.

Criticism of BCFS

Todd Starnes, a columnist and commentator for Fox News, carried a series of reports critical of BCFS shelter operations at Lackland AFB and a similar facility at Fort Sill in Oklahoma, each capable of housing about 1,200 children, ages 12 to 17.

Starnes quoted unnamed sources who claimed the government is downplaying health risks—including tuberculosis, measles, chicken pox, lice and scabies—at the facilities. Starnes also alleged a security force there bullied staff and threatened them with arrest if they spoke publically about conditions in the facilities.

BCFS [posted a response](#) on its website in which it pointed to its 70-year record of providing “high-quality care for children, families and communities … operating with the greatest level of transparency and integrity.”

“Our team is comprised of professional emergency management and

health-care professionals, and the safety and security of those in our care are protected by off-duty commissioned law-enforcement officers," BCFS stated.

The immigrant children "are under the conservatorship of the federal government and, like any child in foster care, their personal information is private," the statement continued.

BCFS reported all children at the facility are medically screened and immunized according to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines. In its statement online, BCFS reported 119 children treated for lice, 22 treated for scabies and one child hospitalized with swine flu.

"The most common illnesses seen at Lackland are fever, headache, upper respiratory colds and ingrown toenails," BCFS stated.

A 16-member team of mental health clinicians is working at Lackland, and the clinicians are supervised closely by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and its office of refugee resettlement federal field specialist, BCFS noted.

"Religious services are provided each Sunday if youth would like to participate," said Krista Piferrer, executive vice president for external affairs at BCFS. Dan Trevino, associate pastor at [Baptist Temple Church in San Antonio](#), provides five services each Sunday, she noted. The Roman Catholic archbishop of San Antonio also has presided over masses at the shelter. At Fort Sill, a nearby Catholic church and a nondenominational Protestant church offer Sunday worship services.

"BCFS has provided Spanish-language Bibles for youth as well, and many participate in weekly Bible study," Piferrer said.

The agency also pointed out officials from the state and federal government, health-care agencies, faith-based organizations and the news

media visited the shelter and noted its clean and safe operation.

Jeh Johnson, secretary of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, [submitted testimony](#) June 24 to a committee of the U.S. House of Representatives regarding the border crisis.

Commendation from Homeland Security

In addition to commanding the Border Patrol and other federal personnel, Johnson said: "I have also witnessed how the not-for-profit Baptist Child & Family Services stepped in quickly and is also doing a remarkable job housing the unaccompanied children at Lackland, identifying and then placing them consistent with HHS's legal obligations. All of these dedicated men and women deserve our recognition, support and gratitude."

The BGCT has established a "For the Children" fund to help finance ministries to immigrant children. To donate online, [click here](#). Checks can be mailed to P.O. Box 159007, Dallas 75315-9007. Any funds collected beyond the requirements of the current situation will be used for other disaster recovery needs.