

# **Baptists meet needs in midst of latest immigrant surge**

March 17, 2021

As immigration officials along the United States/Mexico border deal with the largest surge of migrants in two decades, Baptists in Texas are seeking to respond to their varied needs.

U.S. Customs and Border Protection reported more than 100,000 border crossings last month, including more than 9,000 unaccompanied minors, and officials predicted those numbers will continue to escalate.

## **Depend on River Ministry missionaries**

The Baptist General Convention of Texas and its River Ministry began preparing early for the situation. In January, Executive Director David Hardage, Associate Executive Director Craig Christina and a dozen other BGCT staff traveled to South Texas to meet with leaders of Rio Grande Valley Baptist Association and pastors of several churches in the area.

The group agreed to rely on River Ministry personnel who already are working along the border to assess needs and identify ministry opportunities.

Cristiana Lambarria, a registered nurse and River Ministry missionary in Matamoros, serves in an encampment for migrants. In addition to teaching English-as-a-Second-Language classes, she provides medicine, hygiene kits, food baskets and medical consultation with the help of local physicians and dentists.



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.

In a February report, Lambarria wrote: "We certainly saw the hand of God on us and his protection. This month, I was able to say goodbye to many of our migrant brothers who have fulfilled their dreams of being able to legally cross into the United States and be able to reunite with their families. We were able to pray and cry together, as well as share how God has been good and faithful."

Josue Valerio, director of the Center for Missional Engagement, noted River Ministry missionaries serve from the Brownsville/Matamoros area to San Diego/Tijuana, providing food, hygiene items and other assistance as they present the gospel.

"We have seen God at work through all these movements of people in the past," Valerio said. "So, today we stand before God with the assurance that the Lord has a plan for us as we minister God's word to the people that have come to our border and our communities."

# Largest potential surge in 20 years

Past “movements of people” include immigration surges in 2014 and 2019, but the current situation has the potential to eclipse those events. Border Patrol agents are “working around the clock” to manage the massive influx of migrants, U.S. Department of Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas said.

“We are on pace to encounter more individuals on the southwest border than we have in the last 20 years,” Mayorkas said in a [March 16 public statement](#).

“We are expelling most single adults and families. We are not expelling unaccompanied children. We are securing our border, executing the Centers for Disease Control and Preventions’ public health authority to safeguard the American public and the migrants themselves, and protecting the children. We have more work to do.”

Mayorkas issued his statement the day after the Dallas City Council learned up to 3,000 unaccompanied male immigrants ages 15 to 17 will be housed in a “decompression center” at the Kay Bailey Hutchison Convention Center. Up to 700 immigrant teens also may be housed at an emergency intake site in Midland, located at a camp formerly used by oilfield workers.

Customs and Border Protection is required to transfer a child to the Department of Health and Human Services within 72 hours of apprehension, but that has not always taken place within the required timeframe due to the influx of unaccompanied minors, Mayorkas acknowledged.

Health and Human Services holds each child for testing and quarantine for COVID-19 or other disease, and then shelters the child until he or she is placed with a sponsor in the United States—typically a family member.

# **Buckner helps coordinate volunteers**



Albert Reyes

Albert Reyes, CEO of Buckner International, is working with Dave Woodyard, his counterpart at Catholic Charities of Dallas, to recruit local Spanish-speaking volunteers to help at the convention center in Dallas. Reyes convened a conference call on March 16 with several Dallas-area Hispanic volunteers in response to the need.

Buckner also offered humanitarian assistance in the form of clothes, new shoes, snack packs, hygiene kits and other items that will be sent to the convention center.

The stateside humanitarian aid is in addition to Buckner's ongoing ministries to children and families not only in Mexico, but also in Guatemala and Honduras—an area of Latin America from which many immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers originate.

"We have ministries in those countries designed to strengthen families in their country of origin, so they have motivation and reasons to stay there," said Scott Collins, vice president of communications at Buckner.

# **Fellowship Southwest continues border**

# ministries

Due to the Migrant Protection Protocols—popularly called the “Remain in Mexico” policy—Fellowship Southwest focused primarily on ministries on the Mexico side of the border the past two years.



Lorenzo Ortiz leads El Buen Samaritano Migrante, a ministry that operates two shelters in Nuevo Laredo, plus one in Saltillo.

“The pastors in our network are continuing their ministries in northern Mexico, because refugees remain in the region and continue to need protection from cartels, as well as food and shelter. Fellowship Southwest is continuing to help fund these ministries and to encourage the pastors, as we have for many months,” said Marv Knox, founding coordinator of the ecumenical network rooted in the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

Now that increasing numbers of migrants are crossing the border, churches related to Fellowship Southwest are working on the U.S. side of

the border.

Knox highlighted several:

- Pastor Carlos Navarro of Iglesia Bautista West Brownsville has resumed his immigrant relief shelter ministry, which closed temporarily because of the Remain in Mexico policy and because of COVID-19. The church helps Brownsville partners provide food, clothing and travel bags to recently admitted migrants before they board buses bound for their sponsors.
- Pastor Lorenzo Ortiz leads El Buen Samaritano Migrante, which continues to operate three shelters in northern Mexico—two in Nuevo Laredo and another in Saltillo. Ortiz also arranges transportation for migrants released in the Del Rio area, helping them travel directly to their sponsors in several regions in the country. To help protect immigrants as they await transportation, he has opened a fourth shelter in Laredo.
- Eddie and Elizabeth Bernal, members of Primera Iglesia Bautista in Harlingen, launched a ministry in that city’s airport. They and other volunteers work three shifts a day to meet migrants released by immigration officials at the airport. They help the migrants understand flight schedules and boarding passes, as well as provide food and provisions for their journeys.

Elket Rodríguez, Fellowship Southwest-CBF immigrant and refugee advocacy and ministry coordinator, and Jorge Zapata, associate coordinator of CBF Texas, both live in the Rio Grande Valley. Rodríguez and Zapata work alongside pastors, helping them evaluate needs and ministry opportunities.

“The other pastors in our network are continuing to minister in their contexts, and all of us monitor the immigrant situation daily,” Knox added. “For example, Rosalío Sosa, pastor of Iglesia Bautista Tierra de Oro in El

Paso, who operates 14 shelters in the state of Chihuahua, is ministering to immigrants who cross the border illegally and are deported back to Mexico.”

## How to help

- **Volunteer.** River Ministry needs volunteers to serve in Laredo, the Rio Grande Valley and Eagle Pass. River Ministry missionaries are coordinating mission trips for churches to assist border ministries. For more information, email [gloria.tillman@txb.org](mailto:gloria.tillman@txb.org) or click [here](#).
- **Hygiene kits.** Migrants need toiletry items as they travel to their final destinations. Each quart-sized clear Ziploc bag can include items such as travel-size soap, shampoo, lotion, toothbrush and toothpaste. For more information, click [here](#).
- **Care Box Kits.** Each \$25 donation will enable River Ministry missionaries to provide a church on the border a box of food that can feed a family for a week. Click [here](#) for more information.
- **Give.** To support River Ministry, click [here](#). To support Buckner, click [here](#). To support Fellowship Southwest’s Border Relief Fund, click [here](#).