

‘Not on our watch,’ Baptists say of immigrant family separation

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BROWNSVILLE—Cooperative Baptists gathered near the U.S.-Mexico border and declared “not on our watch” to any immigration policy that separates children from their parents who cross the border without proper documentation.

Speakers at the prayer vigil—coordinated by Fellowship Southwest, the regional network of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, in partnership with eight other groups—focused on what organizers called “political forces that use children’s freedom as a deterrent to parents who seek safety for their daughters and sons in the United States.”

President Trump signed an executive order June 20 mandating that officials continue to prosecute as criminals anyone who crosses the border illegally but requiring those detained to be held in facilities where parents and children could be together.

Participants at the prayer rally demanded justice for the more than 2,300 children who were separated from their parents prior to the executive order.

Prayer, Bible reading and hymn singing

Participants prayed, read Scripture and sang in Brownsville, standing beside the largest immigrant detention center in the country, which houses more than 1,000 children and teenagers. News crews also descended on the location, where only hours earlier, a 15-year-old boy escaped.



Mary Alice Birdwhistell, pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in Waco, urges participants at a prayer vigil Brownsville to follow in the traditional of the Hebrew midwives in ancient Egypt who said, “Not on our watch.” (Photo courtesy of Marv Knox)

“I wish none of us had to be here today,” lamented Mary Alice Birdwhistell, pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in Waco. She called on Christians to imitate the faith and courage of ancient Hebrew midwives who stood up to the pharaoh of Egypt, who sought to destroy all the Hebrew baby boys.

“Their allegiance was to God and not to pharaoh,” and they insisted, “‘No, not by my watch,’” Birdwhistell said. And now, “we must cry out, ‘No, not on our watch.’”

“Fear calls us to build walls ... but love calls us to stand up to power in bold and biblical ways.”

‘A voice for the voiceless’

The church must be “a voice for the voiceless,” said Jorge Zapata, associate coordinator of the CBF of Texas. “When I was growing up, the U.S. became a place of refuge for my family,” he said, explaining his mother was a U.S. citizen, but his father was a *bracero*, a Mexican who worked seasonally north of the border.

“I was born in Mexico. I was undocumented,” Zapata said. “But I want to thank the Lord, because I was given a chance.”

In Mexico, Zapata’s family was so poor, they didn’t have enough to eat, he said. His father wanted the family to move to the United States to lift them out of extreme poverty, and his mother wanted them to immigrate so her children could get an education.



Jorge Zapata, associate coordinator of CBF of Texas, shared his testimony during a prayer vigil in Brownsville. (Photo courtesy of Marv Knox)

Now, Zapata is a college-educated U.S. citizen and ministers to people who live in the *colonias* along the Texas-Mexico border. Parents bring their children across that border “because they have no future” as they endure poverty and cower from gang violence in Mexico and Latin America, he said.

“Let the church be the house of refuge” for immigrant families, Zapata said. “They need us.”

For Christians, any conversation about immigration “begins with the Bible” and ends with government policy, said Javier Perez, director of missions and poverty alleviation for Buckner International in McAllen.

“We understand what Jesus meant when he said, ‘Let the children come to me, for such is the kingdom of heaven,’” said Perez, who is originally from Colombia. “Hospitality is and should be a core value of that kingdom. We’re here to show hospitality. Let this be a foundation for a bigger movement” of hospitality for immigrant children.

‘Children of promise’

Suzii Paynter, executive coordinator of national CBF, observed, “We are awash in global migration.”

“The image of God in each child brings us to a point of remorse for the separation of these children—children of promise,” said Paynter, former director of the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission.

Christians must hold a paradoxical tension—“be the people of God in a world of laws,” she added. “We can do both.”

John Garland, pastor of San Antonio Mennonite Church in San Antonio, echoed the “children of promise” theme, citing the Prophet Isaiah: “Fear not. I have redeemed you ... and called you by your name.”

“We call people ‘foreigners,’ ... ‘illegals,’ ... ‘dangerous.’ But God calls us by our real name,” Garland said. “I would like to join with Jesus in calling these children by their true name. Their true name is ‘Precious in God’s Sight.’”

Call to remember history

Mitch Randall, executive director of EthicsDaily.com, reminded the crowd of the United States’ “dark history of separating children from families.”

Two generations ago in northern Oklahoma, the government separated his Grandmother Eloise and Great Aunt Ruby from their family as children.

“It does my heart good to see people who say, ‘That is not who we are as a country,’” he said. He called on Christians to “encounter people with open arms, welcoming the stranger, saying: ‘Your journey ends here. ... Let the children come.’”

Melba Zapata, pastor of New Wine Church in La Feria, quoted from Proverbs 31:8-9: “Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all the unfortunate. Open your mouth, judge righteously, and defend the rights of the afflicted and needy.”

“That is what we are doing here today—defending those who cannot defend themselves,” she said.

‘Our hearts ache’

Jon Singletary, dean of the Diana Garland School of Social Work at Baylor University, observed, “It is sad we have to gather on a day like this, in a situation like this.”

In seeking safety and security for their children, “families have to make

hard decisions, life-and-death decisions,” Singletary noted. “I cannot imagine my children being used as a deterrent to decisions I might make.”

He quoted a prayer by Dennis Tucker, associate dean of Baylor’s Truett Theological Seminary: “Our hearts ache for parents who go to bed worrying about their children Our hearts ache for what has become of our nation, for what we have become. God have mercy; Christ have mercy.”

Diann Berry, a Cooperative Baptist Fellowship missionary in Donna, cited “Litany for the Border,” a prayer written by Fran Pratt, a minister at Peace of Christ Church in Round Rock, Texas.

“We pray for an end to corrupt government, violence ... and poverty in Central America,” she said. “We pray for humane and just legislation passed by Congress immediately. ... We pray that we bring the compassion of Christ.”

Separating families “has no place in policy and practice,” insisted Bernadette Correia, lieutenant of the Salvation Army in McAllen. “Families in need should be met with love and compassion.”

Julian Garcia, pastor of The Well Church in Mercedes, imagined what Mother’s Day is like when mothers are separated from their children. “We ultimately are responsible,” he prayed. “Let the mothers of these children know we are sorry.”

In addition to Fellowship Southwest, vigil sponsors included national CBF and its state affiliate, CBF Texas; the Eula Mae and John Baugh Foundation; Buckner International; the Diana R. Garland School of Social Work at Baylor University; EthicsDaily.com; Pastors for Texas Children; and the Texas Christian Community Development Network.

Marv Knox, former editor of the Baptist Standard, is coordinator of Fellowship Southwest.