

Overflow from immigration centers heightens need for ministry

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LAREDO—U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement have called Lorenzo Ortiz daily since last February to inform him how many immigrants will be dropped off at the city's bus station.

Typically, eight to 10 arrive. Ortiz, pastor of Iglesia Bautista Emanuel in Laredo, usually receives the first phone call in late afternoon, but several more calls follow throughout the evening.

Along with several organizations, Ortiz coordinates meals, schedules rides and helps immigrant families at the bus station contact relatives in the United States.

And that's just the initial ministry provided to the 80 or so people released each day from immigration detention centers.

Not enough space available

Families who crossed the border to seek asylum cannot be held at detention facilities because of overcrowding. As a result, Laredo and other border towns see more immigrant families in need, Ortiz said.



Lorenzo Ortiz, pastor of Iglesia Bautista Emanuel in Laredo, coordinates

meals, schedules rides and helps immigrant families contact relatives in the United States. (Photo courtesy of Imelda Corona)

“They are rushing families through the process because they do not have space for them,” he reported.

Homeland Security officials [reported](#) agents expected to stop about 100,000 immigrants at the border last month—more than double the number of unauthorized crossings at the same time in the past few years.

For the past two months, Ortiz said, his ministry has seen close to 2,000 immigrants.

As families arrive at the bus station, Ortiz and other organizations assist them. Volunteers distribute food, while others perform health screenings or help new arrivals contact family members.

They also help protect the immigrants from predators who come to lure families away or to scam them, taking away the limited money they have, he said.

Offering the hope of Christ

Immigrants also receive Bibles, and Ortiz said he tells them about the love God has for them.

Families who are running away from home in fear, many of whom also suffered along the way, find a new hope when they hear the gospel at the bus station, Ortiz said.

“Many families hear about Christ and decide they want to follow him after we talk with them,” he said.

After Ortiz meets families at the bus station, he often goes back to the church where some of the families stay until they find the means to travel and meet their relatives.

Iglesia Bautista Emanuel helps families with the most basic needs, which also means the church needs the assistance of other congregations and individuals to provide food, hygiene kits, clothing of all sizes for adults and children, shoes and diapers, as well as cleaning and cooking supplies.

“The demand is bigger than the resources, but God has provided through other churches,” Ortiz said.

‘Teaching us to be Good Samaritans’



Immigrant families wait at the bus station in Laredo. (Photo / Isa Torres)

The church offers Vacation Bible School-type classes for the children, and families are invited to attend the church’s worship services throughout their stay.

A majority of the families are from Central America, but some have roots in places as far away as Angola, Russia and Uzbekistan, Ortiz noted.

For the church and the families themselves, this means constant friction with unfamiliar cultures and social norms, Ortiz noted.

But instead of seeing it as a problem, Ortiz said, the church sees it as an opportunity for growth.

“Even in their own need, they are teaching us to be the Good Samaritans we have been called to be,” Ortiz said.

The ministry Ortiz began has grown more than he [envisioned](#).

Every day, Ortiz also answers the calls of family members back home looking to find the relatives who made the trip to the United States. Many are desperate because they lost touch with their relatives as they traveled north. So, they call Ortiz, hoping he interacted with them already or can give more information about the process immigrants go through before they are released.

Missionaries with Texas Baptists’ River Ministry have seen similar needs. Recently, River Ministry sent out a call for individuals and churches to support the [mission efforts on the border](#) directed toward new arrivals.

Ortiz sees no immediate end to the days when he will handle phone calls from U.S. agents and relatives of immigrant families. So, he is preparing to launch a non-profit organization that will focus solely on that area of ministry.

“People are coming here, and they have come looking for hope,” Ortiz said. “Christ has given us the hope they are looking for to share it with them.”