

River Ministry adapts to changes along closed border

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When the United States/Mexico border was closed March 20 to help slow the spread of the COVID-19 virus, it marked significant changes for Texas Baptist River Ministry missionaries who have been seeking to share God's love with immigrants, refugees and local residents along the Rio Grande.

In El Paso, when a "Stay Home, Work Safe" order led to the temporary closure of schools and nonessential businesses and travel limitations, River Ministry missionary Jesus Galarza saw a huge shift in his work.

Normally, Galarza runs a feeding ministry out of a local school. With the schools closed, Galarza has been unable to continue this ministry. Furthermore, mission trips Galarza had planned with churches had to be canceled or postponed. At this time, he is unsure when these trips will be able to resume.

Galarza asked churches to pray for him and his ministry during this difficult time. Spiritual help is the most important thing churches can give right now, he explained. Pray also for the mission trips that will take place later in the year, after the virus has passed, and that they will be fruitful, he asked.

Serving at-risk individuals



Volunteers minister to residents of Casa Bethesda in Piedras Negras.
(Photo courtesy of Jeff Bray)

Gloria de la Pena is River Ministry missionary in Piedra Negras, Mexico, who works with women's prisons, orphanages and migrant camps, coordinating mission trips with churches to serve these at-risk people.

With mission trips no longer happening, de la Pena asked churches to pray for the people in these facilities. One of the orphanages, Casa Bethesda, houses 26 special-needs children, some of whom could be more susceptible to COVID-19.

She expressed hope that during the time of social distancing and working from home, people will turn to God and then find ways to minister safely to those in their immediate surroundings. De la Pena encouraged churches to ask God to turn setbacks into blessings.

"Pray that everyone can use this quiet time working at home to look to the Lord, learn to have more gratitude and a happy heart, and love our families, friends and all the people who need to know about Jesus," she said.

Unable to enter immigrant camps

River missionary Cristina Lambarria serves in Matamoros, Mexico, where she works in immigrant camps, providing food, clothing and other resources, including English classes. However, she and her team have been unable to enter the camps because of the risk of infection. It is both unsafe for them because of the crowded living conditions and unsafe for the immigrants, who could be exposed to the virus, she explained.

“Nobody can go into the camps right because we want to protect them. If one gets sick, everyone will get it. They are in communication all the time. They cannot be like us in their homes. The restrooms are outside, and they have to cook in a communal kitchen. So, we decided not to go in the camp right now,” Lambarria said.

Lambarria asked churches to lift up the immigrants in prayer, asking God to protect them from the virus. She also asked for prayer as workers look for ways safely to get food and other resources to the immigrants in the camps.

A vulnerable context

Shon Young is a River missionary in Del Rio, where he is the president of Val Verde Border Humanitarian Coalition. Val Verde was formed in April 2019 when Border Patrol agents approached local churches about ways to respond to the increased number of immigrants passing through Del Rio.

The coalition provides supplies and helps immigrants reach their final destination in America. Val Verde has served thousands of immigrants, asylum seekers and refugees, but with the border closure, both needs and strategies to meet those needs have grown more complex.

“There are so many variables, and we are really trying to keep our eyes and

ears open to the chance to minister to those in crisis,” Young said. “Please pray for the border and the congregations on both sides of the river. It is already a vulnerable context with problems that vary from the rest of Texas and adding an extra layer on it will be difficult. Please pray for pastors of the churches that already run on a tight budget and that their churches will continue to support their work even in an atmosphere that people are not able to work or are working less.”