

River Ministry missionary adapts during COVID-19 crisis

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HOUSTON—Silvia Briones, a missionary with Texas Baptist River Ministry, discovered new ways to serve—locally as a hospital chaplain and globally by offering training and organizing online prayer meetings—when the COVID-19 crisis restricted in-person ministry along the Rio Grande.

In her role with River Ministry, Briones previously led mission teams to the Texas/Mexico border, hosted seminars for pastors and visited immigrant families.

Briones also has been an endorsed Texas Baptist chaplain for seven years, serving at Houston Methodist Hospital whenever called upon in special circumstances.

When the COVID-19 outbreak began, the hospital contacted her to ask if she would serve. Though initially hesitant because she and her husband both fall into an at-risk category, Briones said she did not have peace about staying home while people in the hospital needed to hear from God.

So, she went to work providing emotional and spiritual support to patients, family members, staff and anyone else who needed it in the hospital.

Direct ministry to patients has been harder than usual, since visits are extremely limited to reduce the risk of exposure to the virus, she explained. To communicate with patients, Briones calls them over the phone. If necessary, she makes visits to non-COVID-19 patients, but only in extreme situations.



Silvia Briones, a River Ministry missionary, also is a chaplain endorsed by Texas Baptists.

As the only Spanish-speaking chaplain at the hospital, Briones felt a burden to reach out specifically to patients who could not speak English.

“It’s been a blessing, because I know a lot of the people are missing the spiritual and emotional care that others can have because they don’t speak the language,” she said.

Furthermore, Briones is using her experiences as a chaplain to train others. She has led online seminars for pastors and volunteers in Ecuador who wanted to minister to people affected by COVID-19, including those who have recovered and the family members of those that have died.

The webinars are offered in partnership with the Baptist Medical Association in Ecuador, which has been instrumental in recruiting pastors to help with this effort. The association approached Briones about training the pastors so that they would be able to respond to the specific needs people impacted by the virus are facing. So far, four sessions have taken

place, and Briones has plans for more in the near future.

Praying for the nations

Above all, Briones believes the most important thing she can do during this outbreak is pray. She began to think of ways she could connect with other Christians to pray with them as the virus continues to affect people globally.

“Since we are staying home and can’t do anything, I was thinking about what I could do to help from home,” Briones said. “I prayed about it, and I thought of a few friends who were in different countries who were my prayer partners. I asked them if they could help me plan a prayer meeting with more women from Latin American countries.”

Their first Zoom prayer meeting on Easter evening involved 49 women from 13 countries who joined together to pray for the nations.

“It was really good,” Briones said. “We planned it for one-and-a-half hours, but it went for two hours. We really enjoyed it, and at the end, nobody wanted to leave. So, I said, ‘Well, we’re going to plan another one.’”

During the second prayer call on May 2, more than 70 women joined in, with one even calling in from Tanzania.

After a short group Bible study, the women broke up into small groups to pray specifically for issues related to the pandemic, such as finding a vaccine and comforting grieving families.

The women chose 2 Chronicles 7:14 as the central verse for their prayer calls: “If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land.”

Briones emphasized the main purpose of the calls was calling out to God in prayer. Instead of inviting renowned speakers or worship leaders, Briones invited the women on the calls to read Scripture and lead prayer related to certain topics. It was important for Briones, who desired to keep the calls focused on prayer and humility. Furthermore, inviting the women to lead was an important way of empowering the women to lead prayers outside of the call and in their own communities, she noted.

“I want people to know that anyone can do this. You don’t have to belong to this or that organization to participate. I want them to know that everyone can pray,” Briones said.