

# **San Antonio Baptist church helps asylum seekers**

September 3, 2018

SAN ANTONIO—When a mother and child seeking asylum in the United States faced deportation last year, Natalie Webb, pastor of Covenant Baptist Church in San Antonio, knew her congregation had the resources and the ability to help.

Even though immigrants have credible reasons to seek asylum in the United States, such as fearing for their own lives or their children's lives, Webb said, immigration courts tend to turn away most applicants.

If asylum seekers are able to find a lawyer to represent them, and the attorney believes the client was turned away in error, an appeal is possible.

In February 2017, the San Antonio Sanctuary Network informed Covenant Baptist Church about a mother and her child who needed sanctuary to remain in the United States while they waited on the court to hear their appeal.

The mother and her child were able to find other resources and did not end up needing Covenant's help, Webb noted. But since that day, her church has participated in the Sanctuary Network, a volunteer-led organization formed last year.

## **San Antonio Sanctuary Network formed**



Natalie Webb is pastor of Covenant Baptist Church in San Antonio and co-chair of the San Antonio Sanctuary Network. (Photo courtesy of Natalie Webb)

Webb and Moon Brand now co-chair the network, which focuses primarily on providing asylum-seeking immigrants short-term shelter and accompaniment to immigration appointments.

“San Antonio Sanctuary Network came out of the [Interfaith Welcome Coalition](#), and it is now its own group,” Webb explained.

[The coalition](#) began aiding immigrants years ago, during the Obama administration. At that time, families sometimes were dropped off at bus stations during the night, even though their buses might not leave until days later.

When the Trump administration made it tougher for immigrants to receive asylum, some congregations in the Interfaith Welcome Coalition declared themselves sanctuary churches. Most provide short-term lodging and

assistance to families as their immigration cases are processed. Some are ready to offer safe haven to immigrants who face deportation.

Since many of the churches of the San Antonio's Sanctuary Network also are part of the Interfaith Coalition, their work involves collaboration from churches of many Christian denominations, as well as other faiths, Brand noted.

## **Sanctuary offered in event of 'worst-case scenario'**

Churches in San Antonio have not had to offer sanctuary to immigrants yet, which is understood as the last aid a church could offer in case of an emergency, Webb clarified.

"Church sanctuary would be the response for families at risk of deportation in kind of a worst-case scenario," Webb said.

The Sanctuary Network also developed other programs, such as enlisting volunteers to accompany asylum seekers to their court dates, immigration check-ins and any other appointment with offices of the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Webb noted.

Webb and Brand both noted a significant change when people from the community accompany asylum-seekers to their appointments. The proceedings tend to go quicker, immigrants receive more favorable outcomes and they are not belittled, Webb said.

## **'We are stronger together'**

Often, when ICE agents learn volunteers of the interfaith coalition are accompanying immigrants, they tend to open up and be more

approachable, Brand added.

They may think volunteers are from the church of their parents, or a family member, so they treat immigrants better, she said.

When people hear “interfaith,” they understand it could be any church offering assistance to their neighbor, Brand observed.

“We are stronger together,” she said.

The few asylum-seekers who are allowed to enter the country and continue their case are dropped off at a bus station until they depart to meet their family members, Webb said.

After the Trump administration implemented a zero tolerance policy that included asylum seekers, families that crossed the border were separated. U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions ordered adult immigrants to be sent to jail while they were prosecuted and children transported to different holding facilities until they were placed with other relatives.

In June, Trump signed an executive order [ending the policy](#) of family separation after public objection. Even though a federal judge [ordered](#) the Trump administration to reunify all families by July 26, hundreds of families still wait to be [reunited](#).

## **Support and short-term shelter for families**

As families wait to continue the journey to their final destination, Covenant has begun to offer short-term shelter for them, Webb said.

Since this summer, the church has hosted five families, which also includes helping them find resources in San Antonio and around the cities where

they are headed, said Webb.

Each family has different needs, so the support Sanctuary Network offers is specific to each case, Brand said.

“After they leave us, and they go to their final destination, we need to make sure that where they’re going they have resources,” said Brand. “We’ll see what immigration center is closest to them, what church that speaks their language is closest to them, and we connect them to that so they can have success.”

Webb’s and Brand’s interaction with immigrant families has developed into friendships, both said. Even after the families have arrived at their final destination, they still call Webb and Brand to talk.

## **Serving the vulnerable**

Through the conversations, Webb and Brand make sure their transition is continuing smoothly, check in on them and see how their children are doing in school, Brand added.

“To me, this is what the mission of the church is,” Webb said. “When I think of my ministry and the church’s ministry, I think about Jesus in Luke, reading from Scripture about how he came to release prisoners, give sight to the blind, and heal the wounded.”

The call of the church is to serve the least of these, so when a church has the space that can be used for a ministry like this, it must be a good steward of its resources, Webb said. It’s simply part of the identity Christians must have, she added.

Even when some people oppose welcoming immigrants, Webb maintained her loyalty is to Christ and to serving those she has been commanded to serve.

“We learn so much from the lives of these families, and especially the women who have stayed with us,” Webb said. “They are the best picture that we have of Jesus; one of strength in weakness, risk and faith, and care for their children.”