



Being the Church, welcoming all on America's southern border

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Someone asked me what being the church on America's southern border is like.

Last month one of our immigrant welcoming churches was visited by a young white supremacist on a Sunday morning. He told another worshipper the pastor should be concerned for their safety. Local and federal law enforcement responded to what they determined was a credible threat.

I listened to a Dreamer at a shelter in Mexico described how he had been deported. He didn't even know how to speak Spanish. And because he was the only wage earner in his family, his children were removed from their mother's custody and placed in foster care.

We've prayed and taken communion together in the place where 16 year old José Antonio Elena Rodríguez was murdered, shot through the border wall 10 times by Border Patrol Agent Lonnie Swartz. And I wept when a jury found Swartz not guilty.

Our sanctuary churches hold press conferences when they accepted guests into residence, and we celebrated together when their guests win their cases.

Our clergy have organized to support immigration activists and their families being targeted for retaliation by law enforcement.

We stand in solidarity with and attend the trials of humanitarians prosecuted for leaving water in the desert. And our volunteers keep delivering water in the desert.

Pastors have mobilized medical rapid response teams when people released from ICE custody and dropped at their church doors were sick and dehydrated. Some of the children needed hospitalization. One needed intensive care.

Johana Medina Leon, a 25 yeara old transgender asylum-seeker from El Salvador in ICE Custody died at an El Paso hospital in May.¹ In July the bodies of two migrants were found in the desert outside Tucson, bringing the number of migrant deaths in Arizona to at least 74 this year.² Experts believe 9000 migrating people have died in the Sonoran Desert in the last decade.³

Now the administration's Migrant Protection Protocol strands families along the Mexican border with no resources. Eventually the courts will determine that Migrant Protection Protocol violates international law and the human rights of asylum seekers. But until that day comes cartels and human traffickers prey on the desperation.

27,000 unaccompanied children, 195,040 people traveling as families, and 78,532 people traveling alone – 300,572 human beings, people, men, women and children – crossed our conference's borders this fiscal year.⁴ United Church of Christ congregations in collaboration and partnership with our ecumenical and interfaith partners have offered them an extravagant "Bienvenido!" provided case management services, medical care, food, clothing, shelter, and as much hope as we can muster to as many of them as we possibly could. And ICE and Border Patrol have incarcerated every one of them at some point in their journey.

The U.S. detention and deportation budget has grown more than 40% since 2017 or by around \$1 billion. And the suffering has grown too. Every dollar for detention, deportation, and border militarization is a dollar for dehumanization, brutalization, and misery. Despite overwhelming evidence demonstrating community-based programs provide better, cheaper alternatives to migrant detention, the U.S. government jails more than 50,000 migrating people every day, costing taxpayers \$3 billion a year.⁵

We don't need more ICE or Border Patrol agents. We don't need more walls. We don't need more detention beds. We need resources for community-based, non-restrictive, family case management programs that build trust between non-profit providers and participants.

We need Congress to include iron-clad "report language" in the DHS appropriations bill that spells out exactly how the Department of Homeland Security can and cannot spend the money allocated to them, putting those dollars out of the reach of the President.

We need Congress to restore funding to humanitarian aid programs in Central America's northern triangle. "An April Mercy Corps survey of 400 people who had participated in a two-year agricultural support program in Guatemala found a 30% drop in "youth who reported seriously considering

¹ <https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/nation/2019/06/03/transgender-migrant-johana-medina-leon-dies-el-paso-hospital/1334883001/>

² <https://www.phoenixnewtimes.com/news/two-more-migrants-bodies-found-outside-tucson-11332524>

³ <https://www.phoenixnewtimes.com/news/two-more-migrants-bodies-found-outside-tucson-11332524>

⁴ <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/sw-border-migration/usbp-sw-border-apprehensions>

⁵ <https://www.immigrantjustice.org/research-items/report-better-way-community-based-programming-alternative-immigrant-incarceration>

migrating 'all the time' or 'frequently' " after participating in the program.⁶ Those dollars must also come with strenuous oversight that puts them beyond the reach of this President.

This administration has transgressed the borders between civility and violence, between debate and hate, between humanity and dehumanization. I am here to tell Congress the Southwest Conference of the United Church of Christ has zero tolerance for political policies that violate human dignity and dehumanize our neighbors – migrating people, federal agents, and residents of America's militarized southern border communities alike. With the righteous anger of Jesus overturning tables in the Temple I am here to say, "Pass a moral budget! Defund the hate."

⁶ <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2019/09/17/761266169/trump-froze-aid-to-guatemala-now-programs-are-shutting-down>