

The Story of a visit to Mexican border migrant shelters

“It is not common to have guests from the Methodist Church of England on this side of the world”, Pastor Joel Hortiales—a Mexican currently working for the California Pacific Conference—told us as we stood at the end of the Mexican goods train line in Mexicali. The train is known as *La Bestia*, or *The Beast*. It runs the length of Mexico, dividing part-way north into three main sections. It is the transport used by most migrants travelling north to the Mexico/USA border. Men, women [including pregnant women], children and babies ride on top of the goods being carried, or low down on the wagons. Many try to jump aboard the moving train. Many injuries and deaths occur, which the Mexican people have to deal with. Sympathetic Mexicans throw food to the travellers as the train passes. This is sometimes their only food source. Organised crime members of cartels also ride the train to extort whatever they can from the migrants, some of whom have already sold all they owned to seek a better life. Those who refuse to pay are pushed off the train.

Most migrants who reach the border seek refuge in shelters. These are often overcrowded as ‘waves’ of travellers arrive, often overwhelming the local people offering what they can in humanitarian aid, most of whom have little themselves.

The churches have a few shelters along the rail track, but most are at the borders. We visited shelters in Monterrey, Piedras Negras, Nuevo Laredo and Reynosa, accompanied by Pastor David and Ephraim the lawyer or Pastor Jaser. Then in Tijuana and Mexicali with Bishop Filipe. All were over full, and the quality of accommodation, facilities, cleanliness and support varied. Most tried to provide some social service and psychological support to traumatised travellers, and help them to obtain the necessary papers to cross to the USA or remain in Mexico. Some managers/supervisors seemed overwhelmed by the task and exhausted by the constant new arrivals, while others were well ordered and efficient. The best were smaller more homely institutions, while others had closed their doors, unable to receive any more people at present, so families were sleeping on the streets outside—a dangerous occupation where cartel gangs often operate. Outside one shelter we met a young man, his eight month pregnant wife and their two year old, asking for help to get into a shelter. The shelter had filled all available inside space with mattresses and outside space with various shapes and sizes of tents. One estimate was that there were around twenty pregnant women on the street outside; six babies had been born there in the last couple of weeks.

Many of the migrants gather around town bridges or in the squares, keeping out of sight until a church group arrives with food and then appearing from the shadows. Members of local churches often take one day a week to provide a meal in their area, or to gather clothes for the shelters. They are seeking to live out their faith in practical ways and were truly inspiring, trusting that God will provide what is needed. Although many of the migrant stories were desperate and full of trauma, the majority were able to hold eye contact and smile (even though I did not speak the language), which showed that hope was still alive.

The Facts

When:
22 April–3 May 2019

Where:
Mexico
(Monterrey, Piedras Negras, Nuevo Laredo and Reynosa; Tijuana and Mexicali)

Who:
Hilary Evans (Vice President, Methodist Women in Britain)
Rev. Felicity Al-Hassan (Interpreter)

Why:
Methodist Women in Britain Presidential visit to obtain information about migration and links to human trafficking



Relevant persons and websites:

U-tube videos of *La Bestia*
Bishop Jose Antonio Garza, Monterrey;
Pastor David Medrano Diaz;
Ephraim G. Guerrero Miranda (lawyer);
Consul in Monterrey;
Pastor Jaser.
Bishop Filipe Ruiz Aguilar;
Guillermo Naverrete Prince (lay Pastor);
Revd Joel Hortiales (Director of Hispanic Ministries and Border Concerns, UMC)

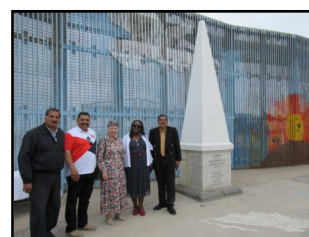
One young man had travelled from Angola with his family (twenty in all) because his mother was of a minority ethnic group and had been persecuted. So, they had sold all they owned, flown to Brazil, and over five months worked their way north. Part of the journey involved crossing the jungle. He had crossed back and forth to help carry the children through. His legs were lacerated. He had lost touch with his mother for several days, but eventually been re-united, but on the journey he had learnt three languages and was working with the local church as an interpreter for new arrivals. The church members hope he will stay and become a Pastor.

Our journey from Nuevo Laredo to Reynosa took us along a road where Cartel members operate. There were many sad stories. We passed a checkpoint of Federal Police. Our guides constantly looked in the rear view mirrors, then suddenly increased speed dramatically. The checkpoint had set up a car to follow us: not Federal police, but gang members posing as such.

Following our visit to Reynosa we discovered that it is recognised as the most dangerous city in Mexico because the cartels openly operate there. Areas are deserted because the residents have had extortion visits from the gangs and so have moved away; statues to the dead have been erected by the cartels in three areas (their patron saint of guns) to show that they are in control. There were stories of gun fights and kidnappings; however it seemed that compared to a few years ago, in general, if one does not bother the gangs, they will largely leave you alone.

At the edge of the Pacific in Tijuana, there is a lighthouse. Each Sunday a short service is held on both sides of the border wall for families that are separated. The vertical metal slat wall has a metal grid wall added fairly recently on the American side. So, where family members used to be able to hug one another through the bars, they now 'kiss' by touching 'pinky' fingers through the small holes. The wall itself seems to march across the hills, right down to the beach.

I have tried to give a flavour of our experiences. Our emotions were many and various as we saw and heard horrific stories of bravery in dangerous circumstances, talked with those determined to do all they could to offer humanitarian aid and more, and were inspired by strong acts of simple faith. A fascinating, thought provoking experience, a country with many challenges and in need of international help to begin to address many of them—Mexico, because of its geographical position, caught in situations not of its own making, but working for improvements.



Follow up actions/outcomes:

- 1] To contact the above named people for more information about specific ways to offer support; to explore initial ideas to support costs of legal processes to furnish those rescued from exploitative situations, helping the rehabilitation process; to further to assess possible means of providing a rehabilitation centre in the Monterrey area.
- 2] To investigate viable means of supporting unaccompanied minors who have been trafficked.
- 3] To invite donations towards the costs of running the migrant shelters from groups who have participated in MWiB days.
- 4] To Consider how to gain support from governments/international community to address underlying issues that drive people to migrate
- 5] To investigate whether the Global Relationships Office can offer any support to the Methodist church of Mexico.