Dying to get in: Crisis on the Mexican border

by Rick Ufford-Chase in the August 10, 2004 issue

Last year over 200 people lost their lives as they tried to cross the border from Mexico into Arizona. They died from dehydration in the 120-degree heat of the Sonoran Desert. They died in storm drains as they tried to cross during the flash-flood season. They died in the trunks of vehicles that were abandoned by “coyotes” (smugglers), and in rollover accidents during high-speed chases.

That’s just in Arizona. Hundreds more died attempting to cross into California, New Mexico and Texas. The problems along the 2,300-mile border between Mexico and the U.S. have grown to crisis proportions. President Bush knows this, some congressional representatives know it, and it has become an inescapable challenge to churches in both countries.

In January President Bush acknowledged that the “system is not working.” Recognizing that “our ability to assimilate newcomers” is one of the “defining strengths of America,” he called for a reformed immigration policy that will 1) open borders to legal travel and trade while shutting them to drug traffic, criminals and terrorists; 2) serve the economic needs of the U.S. while providing fair income and legal protection for working visitors; and 3) offer incentives for immigrants to return to their country of origin.

To his credit, Bush realizes that immigration reform cannot be a quick fix: “The best way in the long run to reduce the pressures that create illegal immigration in the first place is to expand economic opportunity among the countries in our neighborhood. Real growth and real hope in the nations of our hemisphere will lessen the flow of new immigrants.”

But that is the long run. In the short run, something must be done. To begin with, says Robin Hoover, a Disciples of Christ pastor and president of Humane Borders, “We must take death out of the migration equation.” This summer waves of newcomers are crossing into the deserts of the western U.S., many of them abysmally unprepared for what lies in store for them.

For this reason, a broad alliance of religious communities and humanitarian groups along the border—named “No More Deaths”—has mounted an effort to bolster migrant services. On Memorial Day, about 100 churchpeople from across the country gathered in a dry wash 60 miles southwest of Tucson to dedicate the first “Ark of the Covenant” aid station. The idea behind it is simple: if migrants can’t make it to the churches, the churches will move to the desert.

As participants gathered around a small shrine beside a motor home and a tarp in the desert, they prayed together and placed on the altar jars of water, photos and their hopes for a new border policy. The camp will be staffed continuously by church folks from all over the U.S. who are fed up with the senseless death and who are willing to go to the desert themselves to offer food, water and medical care to keep “the migrant Jesus” alive.

Two hours later, many of us gathered across the Mexican border in Sasabe, Sonora, where many migrants begin their journey. We stood before three large crosses that commemorate the lives of more than 2,500 migrants who have died in desert crossings in the past ten years. “How many more?” one cross asks. As we concluded the service, 30 hikers headed into the desert on a weeklong, 70-mile “Walk for Life” to Tucson to bring attention to the situation of the migrants.

Two days later, the marchers straggled into a camp about 20 miles north of the border. Temperatures hovered over 110 degrees. Maryknoll lay missionary West Cosgrove said, “I can’t understand how anyone makes it out of this desert alive.”

In the 15 years I have lived and worked on the U.S.-Mexican border, I have met hundreds of undocumented migrants and heard their stories. Often I take visitors to a little town called Altar, 60 miles south of Sasabe. We travel a dirt road crowded with hundreds of beat-up shuttle vans that move more than 1,500 migrants a day up to the border. In Altar, we visit a hospitality house run by the Roman Catholic Archdiocese. In the central plaza in front of the Catholic church, each day from late winter through mid-summer, dozens of buses arrive from the south, carrying hundreds of people who intend to cross the border. They come from all over Mexico and parts of Central America.

Grupo Beta, Mexico’s border safety force, says that during February of this year it made contact with more than 37,000 people headed to the border from Altar, on foot or in vehicles. The number was 4,000 higher than in February 2003.

As people exit the vehicles, blinking in the hot desert sun, voices call out all around them: *Come with me—I'm the best*! . . . *I can get you to Chicago*. . . . *Only one thousand dollars to Phoenix*! The last time I was there I encountered a woman in her mid-70s who had no idea where she was going. On one visit I met two teenage girls who were traveling north with their parents' blessing to look for work in order to send money home. Wearing short-sleeved shirts, polyester slacks and open-toed sandals, they were planning to walk across the desert.

It was in Altar that a 40-year-old woman named Veronica made contact with a local coyote. The single mother of a son in his teens, she had been living with her mother on the outskirts of Mexico City. Unable to earn enough money to send her son to high school, she decided to look for better-paying work in the States. In mid-July of 2002, she left her son with her mother and headed north with her 20-year-old nephew.

In Altar they gave all the money they had to a coyote, agreeing that they would pay him hundreds of dollars more once they found jobs. Then with a dozen strangers they began their hike across the desert, heading for Phoenix.

They left at dusk, hiking all that night and all the next day. Before long they ran out of water. As Veronica became dehydrated, she began to vomit and could not keep up with the others. It takes only a few hours to die of dehydration in the desert. As one's body loses fluid, death can seem preferable to the agony. It is easy to give up.

Eventually, the coyote left Veronica and her nephew behind, considering them not worth the risk of slowing down. Veronica's nephew half-carried her for several hours to the nearest road. By then she had lost consciousness. Someone stopped and picked them up, and a few hours later Veronica was in a Tucson hospital. Twice in the emergency room her heart stopped beating, but the doctors were able to revive her.

I met Veronica a week later when she was released from intensive care. Her lips and tongue were still completely black, and she was unable to speak. Her cerebral cortex had stopped functioning as a result of severe dehydration. During the following week, I spent time with her each day, and watched what could only be called a miraculous recovery. By my fourth visit she began to regain her speech, and on the sixth day we used my phone card to call her son on his birthday. I held her hand as they spoke and her eyes filled with tears, tears her body could not have produced

just a few days before.

Veronica’s experience is not an isolated one. It is the logical outcome of intersecting social forces. She thought that going north was her only option. Once she made that decision, she became the victim of a carefully planned border enforcement strategy carried out during the 1990s by the Immigration and Naturalization Service. Beginning with “Operation Blockade” in El Paso, and continuing with “Operation Gatekeeper” in San Diego, “Operation Safeguard” in Arizona and “Operation Rio Grande” in South Texas, the strategy has been simple and deadly. The government has beefed up the Border Patrol, adding over 1,500 armed agents to the staff, along with armed vehicles and helicopters, and it has constructed new walls in each border city. This action has meant that the only places left for crossing are in the harshest, most dangerous parts of the desert. The idea was to deter migration. It hasn’t worked.

In 1995, before the walls went up, not a single migrant death in the desert had been recorded. Every single year since then the numbers have increased.

Why do people come? To answer this question, we need to return to President Bush’s assertion about the need to expand economic opportunity south of the border. Implementing that vision involves far more than a legal work program and tighter border controls.

While living in Guatemala for six months in 2003, I learned something of what happens on the ground in these “countries in our neighborhood.” For example, I visited a women’s cooperative in a Mayan village just outside San Juan Ostuncalco. Fraternidad, the Presbyterian Development Agency that hosted our visit that day, had been working with a group of 20 women to help them grow potatoes for sale in the market. When the women obtained a small loan to begin a cooperative several years ago, their goal was to supplement their husbands’ income enough to keep their kids in school. When they went to market with their crop at the end of the first season, they covered their expenses and made a little money. They felt good about their efforts, and the staff of the Fraternidad was encouraged about their long-term prospects.

However, after the second season they discovered they could not match the price of other vendors in the market. Their competitors were selling Canadian potatoes that had been shipped, tariff-free, all the way to the highlands of western Guatemala. If

they matched the price on the imported potatoes, they could not make even enough to pay back the micro-credit loan they had taken to get started.

The women's experience illustrates one of the consequences of neoliberal economic policy, represented by, among other things, the North American Free Trade Agreement, established in 1994 between the U.S., Canada and Mexico. Such agreements pave the way for corporations to move out of the U.S. in order to cut costs. Thousands of workers are needed in the new factories. Countries south of the border cut their subsidies to small farmers, while at the same time undercutting local prices with heavily subsidized food from the north. Poor farmers find there is no way to support their families on the land.

As these countries have shifted their limited budgets from the agricultural to the industrial sector, little or no money is left to provide even basic social services or any kind of social safety net. So workers head for the cities to work in the factories. All over Mexico, and increasingly across Central America, rural communities have become ghost towns, populated by old folks and children who survive on monthly checks sent home by family members who have become economic migrants.

These macroeconomic policies explain why people leave the countryside. But why do they leave the factories in Mexico and head north to wash dishes, clean houses or work for a landscaper in the U.S.? Consider that the take-home pay for the average worker in Nogales, Sonora, where my organization operates a community center, is about ten pesos per hour. When that worker goes to the store to buy a gallon of milk, it costs 30 pesos, the equivalent of three hours' work. That's equivalent to a U.S. laborer working three hours—at, say, $6 an hour—to buy a gallon of milk for $18.

Factory workers in Mexico will spend 70 percent of two wage earners' salaries to provide a basic diet for a family of five. Workers in Latin America are paid the standard wage in their country's currency, but they are increasingly becoming consumers in the global economy. When they go to the store, they are confronted with the same choices that I have at the Safeway—and often with higher prices. The difference, of course, is that they make only one eighth, one tenth or even one 20th of what a comparable worker in the North is making.

In the long run, the president is right. The most successful way to resolve our border and immigration crisis is to create economic opportunities that will allow people to

stay in their countries of origin. But that will never be accomplished with a trade policy that regards smaller nations as nothing more than a cheap labor supply, or a place to get cheap natural resources, or as a market for U.S. subsidized agricultural commodities.

Traditionally, participants in this debate are characterized as either “protectionist” on one side or “free traders” on the other. I would suggest that there is a third way—a trade policy that goes beyond providing economic opportunities for corporations and seeks to create sustainable communities.

That’s a large order. But it is not morally defensible to create a global economy without accepting the responsibility of building a global community. A global economy without a global community is morally bankrupt.

One thing is certain. The migrants will keep coming.

I didn’t quite finish Veronica’s story. When she was well enough to travel, the Mexican consul agreed to buy her a plane ticket home. As I pushed her wheelchair up the concourse, I told her how grateful I was for the miracle God had worked in her life. Despite years of exposure to people like Veronica, who knowingly risk their lives to reach the U.S., I still was not prepared for her answer. She said simply, “I’ll have to try again.”