

Faith groups in Tijuana rise to meet needs of migrant caravan

In addition to the thousands who arrived with the caravan, people deported from the U.S. have been living in Tijuana—sometimes on the streets.

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The bulk of the migrant caravan that started out from Central America this fall reached the U.S.-Mexico border in early December, and the city of Tijuana is overwhelmed by the arrival of more than 6,000 people, many hoping to gain political asylum in the United States.

Although accustomed to constant traffic across the border, Tijuana was not fully prepared to accept such a large group for an unknown length of time. Nonetheless, the Central American migrants have seemingly been welcomed thus far, in part thanks to religious groups that are organizing to help manage the sudden influx.

The Salesian Refuge of Tijuana, run by members of the Roman Catholic Salesian order, manages the Padre Chava Refectory, located north of Tijuana, less than 25 feet from the border. The refectory has been serving meals for more than 19 years. Typically, the Salesians serve 800 breakfasts per day to migrants and street people in Tijuana. However, the group plans to offer three meals per day to help the migrant caravan. In early December the group was already serving more than 1,200 breakfasts.

Situations like this are not new for the Salesians, whose main objective is to help vulnerable people and migrants in particular. In late 2016, another migrant group, consisting of about 3,000 Haitians, became stranded at the border. The Salesians helped find shelter for many of them in the Mexican state of Baja California after

they were denied asylum in the United States.

Similarly, the Church of the Nazarene in Mexico has installed a mobile unit on the outskirts of the Salesian shelter to address the migrants' medical needs. Many of the Central Americans arrived with lice, bedbugs, and a plethora of other ailments after trekking several thousand miles.

Aside from large religious groups, some individuals are proselytizing migrants, or at least hoping to help with spiritual needs in addition to the myriad physical needs the caravan members face. Jorge Guillermo Santos Ríos, a pastor, offers nightly prayers, and dozens come asking for hope in achieving the American dream.

John Fanestil, a United Methodist pastor, and Guillermo Navarrete, a lay leader in the Methodist Church of Mexico, hold church every Sunday in Friendship Park, a meeting place next to the ocean on the border between Mexico and the United States. One day in November, Navarrete and Fanestil blessed a pair of young Honduran newlyweds.

Their ministry team is opening a day center near the San Ysidro Port of Entry into the United States offering shelter and legal, psychological, and spiritual support to migrants from the caravan as well as people deported to Mexico. Mexican Methodists are also providing meals and other assistance to migrants in Tijuana and elsewhere.

Navarrete said many deportees die while trying to return to their families in the United States. Others who choose to live in Mexico end up living in harsh, outdoor conditions.

"Deportees are often lost and overwhelmed when they find themselves suddenly in a place they don't know," he said. "Traumatized by their deportation, they frequently end up suffering from chronic depression."

A pilot program started by Navarrete and supported by the California-Pacific Conference of the United Methodist Church and the Methodist Church of Mexico cared for 20 men who suffered from depression while on the streets. The men were offered counseling and psychological treatment. They attended workshops and lived in dormitories with fully equipped kitchens.

The pilot program was successful and has partial funding at this point.

“People need help with mental illness,” Navarrete said. “God calls and we hear.”
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