



Is there Room For Them?

by Rev. Leslie Schenk

They had to leave their home and travel far. For safety reasons they joined with others along the way, forming caravans of sorts. Their names were Mary and Joseph, traveling from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Their names were Marta and Josef, traveling from Bavaria to Ellis Island and then to Milwaukee. Their names are Maria and Jose, traveling from Honduras to the US border, seeking asylum. All seeking a safe place to rest, a home, a welcome.

The stories are similar, but is our response? For many of the Marias and Joses on the border, there is no welcome other than tear gas and bullets, even though they are legally seeking the chance at asylum from violence, death, and harsh economic conditions not of their own making.



Protesting migrant deaths in the desert, on the Mexican side of the wall



At the border wall in Arizona

But for some, there is a welcome. There is humanitarian aid at the border: in the desert there are water stations and patrols offering food and medical help. There are folks witnessing to and speaking out against the inadequate legal help offered at court hearings. There is neighbor helping neighbor. Such stories and more were shared by Rev. Randy Mayer, pastor of The Good Shepherd UCC in Sahuarita, Ariz. (between Tucson and Nogales, Mexico), at a public talk in Madison on Nov. 3, and at a worship service on Nov. 4, both joint events sponsored by Lake Edge UCC and Plymouth Congregational UCC of Madison.

The work of The Green Valley/Sahuarita Samaritans (Los Samaritanos), a group from Mayer's church and the local community dedicated to providing humanitarian aid to migrants, is vital to that congregation's gospel call. Mayer poignantly shared how when one encounters a migrant in need in one's hometown, practically in one's own backyard, one cannot help but respond by trying to help. "You

see the person, not the statistic,” Mayer explained as he encouraged us all to look beyond the rhetoric to see how we are called to respond as “good Samaritans.” You can get more information about the work of The Samaritans at www.gvs-samaritans.org.

Diane Henrichs, a member of First Congregational UCC in Janesville, went to Sahuarita in mid-November as part of an educational mission trip sponsored by the Minnesota Conference. She witnessed a day in Operation Streamline court, visited the border wall (fences and walls that began to be built in 1993 and have continued to be built to this day), and traveled to Nogales to learn more about how migrants are exploited by the cartels and gangs and often treated poorly by Border Patrol in their quest to gain freedom from violence. “You don’t have to go far into the desert to see how difficult the crossing is,” Diane said, noting the highly uneven terrain in addition to temperature extremes, crossing in the dark at night, and cactus spines.

After her trip, Diane came away with a key question: “How do we manage our border?”, citing the complexity of this humanitarian and political issue, “This is surely NOT the way!” But she was also blessed by an encounter of grace. One of the churches from Minnesota had put together some crosses that they wanted to tie to the border wall during the School of the Americas (SOA) Watch and protest held during the trip, with the names of people who had died in the desert or were assassinated by graduates of the SOA. The group wanted to attach the crosses with zip ties but was having trouble getting the ties around the fence uprights. A protestor on the Mexican side of the wall stepped up and said, “do you need help with that?” Together, caring people on both sides of the wall put up crosses on the wall. For Diane and others there, this shared prophetic witness symbolized hope, as well as the call that those attending had taken up from the Talmud’s version of Micah 6:8: “Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world’s grief. Do justly, now. Love mercy, now. Walk humbly, now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it.”



A desert walk