

Welcome to the first installment of the SJRaise monthly newsletter! Our goal - to provide you and your congregation with timely and useful resources for your efforts to stand with immigrants in our Diocese and beyond.

In this and future issues, look for news, educational materials, worship resources, calls to action, and potential allies in this important work. While the struggle to defend the rights of immigrants can be daunting, there is a wide community of folks in the church and beyond who are engaged in the work with you. You are not alone! We hope this newsletter and that community make your efforts easier!

Several of us from the SJRaise team were privileged to participate in the Second Annual Border Ministries Summit, Nov. 21-23, in Tucson, Arizona. It gave us an inspiring glimpse of that wider community. Hosted by the Episcopal Diocese of Arizona, the ecumenical meeting gathered two hundred activists from along the United States/Mexico border and beyond. There were groups involved in many forms of direct service to immigrants, both in the U.S. and in Mexico, others were engaged in political advocacy, seeking a more just and humane U.S. immigration policy. Others were engaged in education on the issue. And some were doing all three.

In coming issues we'll be lifting up some of those groups. Today, I'd like to recall one such effort, Take Up the Cross. Begun by artist Alicia Baucom, Take Up the Cross seeks to personalize the sobering statistics of unidentified migrant deaths in the Pima County area of Southern Arizona - an area of deadly heat, rough desert terrain and poisonous reptiles. Since 2001, some 3000 migrants have died in this area; more that 1/3 of them remain unidentified. Imagine the families they've left behind and/or the ones that awaited them. No news. No way to know what's become of them.

Each unidentified body is assigned an ID number by law enforcement. Alicia was inspired to fashion crosses with one of those numbers at the center of each cross (see photo). Each cross a memorial to that person whose only crime was seeking a better life for themselves and their family. The cross is also a reminder of those who even now are in the desert struggling to stay alive.

The Pima County Medical Examiner's Office in collaboration with a local non-profit group, Humane Borders, has created a searchable migrant death map. With the number from the cross it's possible to see the exact location where that person's body was found, along with other information, such as the name and gender of the deceased (if known and if the family has been notified), date of discovery, and cause of death. It makes that number much more real.

Alicia invites those who receive her crosses to use them as inspiration for sharing the story of those unidentified migrants, and for prayer:

- for that person's family, that they may ultimately know the fate of their loved one
- for those who are struggling now in the desert to stay alive
- for those whose lives are so threatened by violence and poverty that they are considering making this deadly journey
- for those who are seeking to bring humanitarian assistance to those making this journey
- for a more just and humane immigration policy

I found Alicia's effort humbling and inspiring. Hers is heart work. With no special knowledge and no institutional support, she just started. She responded to God's call in her heart. May she be a model to us all!

For me, the Border Ministries Summit was a glimpse of the reign of God manifested in the dedicated work of so many people at the conference - and of people like you. We are all involved in this prophetic work. It also served as a reminder to me of the borders that exist here right here in the Diocese of San Joaquin, between citizens and undocumented, between rich and poor, between those with access to health care and those without. The task of the church, it seems to me, is to keep crossing those borders wherever we are, to bridge those divides, and to challenge any narrative that suggests any person is not deserving of our love and care.

Blessings on your journey in this Advent Season!

*The Reverend Deacon Tom Hampson is the Co-chair of the EDSJ Immigration Commission.*

*San Joaquin Refugee and Immigrant Support and Empowerment (SJRaise) is the Immigration Commission of the Episcopal Diocese of San Joaquin.*