

Accompanying asylum-seekers at our border

by Jennifer Wilder

Seeking asylum when facing persecution and torture is a human right backed by international and national law, including the 1951 Refugee Commission ratified by the United States in 1968. Recently, I volunteered with local organizations at the San Diego/Tijuana, Mexico border, drawn to witness the pursuit of asylum by the “caravans” from Central America.

As a Spanish-speaking pastor I was told I could best serve in two capacities in Tijuana: providing pastoral care to asylum-seekers and advocating for them within the city. Each morning, I walked across the border to a plaza in Tijuana, where asylum-seekers arrive with only the clothes in their packs, terrified and without full knowledge of what comes next.

With pain in the pit of my stomach, I described the heart-breaking process to families who had just arrived after exodus journeys of three months to seven years:

When your number is called, you load your children on an armored bus for transport to prison-like detention. In detention, you might or might not be granted an interview to demonstrate the “credibility” of your fears. If you “pass,” authorities set a bond up to \$35,000. If you can ever pay the bond and acquire a fiscal sponsor, you are released into the United States in the dark of night with an ankle-chain tracking device. Within 11 months, you must present your case and depending on the evidence of your persecution and torture, you might receive asylum. If at any point in that process you don’t “pass,” you are deported back to the country from which you fled violence and trauma.

I accompanied and prayed with people whose numbers had just been called and who were preparing to board those prison bar-clad buses.

New arrivals also faced the reality that the wait on the “list” in Tijuana averages three to seven months. Only 20 to 30 people were called daily in late January, limited by quotas from the U.S. Families subsist alongside tens of thousands of other asylum-seekers flooding Tijuana.

The reality defied description: Tent villages larger than the eye could see. Clothes, shoes and papers that never dry. Hundreds of different languages spoken. Public officials forcing people out of camps because of the political attention focused on the region.

Which leads to my afternoons in Tijuana: I listened to the stories that forced people from their home countries—like Haiti, El Salvador, Guinea—all across the globe. Trauma, violence, fear, and desperation predominate. And as asylum-seekers search in the proverbial wilderness for safety, they are treated like transgressors and criminals.

In every moment of my experience the ethos along the border felt a world away from the guaranteed legal right to seek asylum and from the commands in every major spiritual tradition to care for strangers and foreigners because our families have each been foreigners in strange lands.

Every afternoon we walked through the city in small groups to already-packed shelters to plead to one over-burdened shelter manager after another the same question we should be asking hearts and minds the world over: “Can you make just a little more room at the inn?”

Jennifer Wilder is pastor of Alliance congregational partner Broadview Church in Sunderland, Maryland.