

Purposefully Present by Julia Pinto

In the first weeks of arriving in the desert landscape of Arizona, I journaled: “Why does God have me here? What can I do in my smallness and limitations? This is my home for the next two years? This seems like a land of pain and scarcity. But there’s also resilience and abundance all around me.”

I am a lay missionary with Franciscan Mission Service (FMS), a Catholic nonprofit which equips and sends mission volunteers to Washington DC, Jamaica, Bolivia, and the US-Mexico border. I cannot take credit for ending up in Douglas/Agua Prieta; I know it was God, who through a whirlwind of events and FMS’ in-depth formation training, called me step-by-step to this unique place.



As border missionaries, we partner with Frontera De Cristo and CAME, seeing which needs we can most authentically serve among the ministries that these institutions offer. I am grateful to volunteer twice a week at the migrant shelter in Agua Prieta and two to three times a week at the Migrant Resource Center (CRM). It is also a gift for me to regularly participate in cross plantings and Tuesday night prayer vigils, where we honor those migrants who have perished while crossing in our county, which helps me to reflect on the unacceptable undervaluing of migrant lives and pray for those currently making the treacherous journey. I have also taken the initiative to coordinate activities to foster community among my fellow young adult volunteers in

Agua Prieta and hold informal English classes for those who wish to learn, and I am discerning additional ministries.

Now, halfway through my two-year commitment, and with a new year unfolding, I find myself reflecting on my goals and purpose on mission. At different points in the last year, we received low numbers of migrants, while simultaneously overflowing with volunteers. In times like these, I feel useless and start wondering again, Why am I here? I am not a doctor, engineer, lawyer, or social worker with a project to complete or defined role to fill. This makes me repeatedly return to the



FMS model of a “ministry of presence.” I am not here to be needed; I do not want to become irreplaceable and create a substantial void in the local community when I leave.

Before sending us out to our various sites, FMS asked us to publicly present a personal mission statement. Mine read as follows:



“Through my time on mission at the US-Mexico border with FMS, I seek to become more like Christ in walking with those who are suffering from injustice and isolation on the margins of society. I seek to be forever radically changed in my perspectives and the way I approach life and relationships by learning that I am strong enough to sit with people in their pain, that I can offer my presence and hold onto hope for them and for a better world one day. I seek to humbly accept myself in my limitations and inability to solve the world’s problems and be inspired by the resilience I

encounter in others. I pray for courage, strength, and patience as I accompany migrants and experience God’s love at the US-Mexico Border.”

Based on these goals, am I doing mission well? That depends on the day and how you look at it, as service like this has very soft definitions of success. My Spanish proficiency and knowledge of the local culture are growing, which greatly strengthens my ministry on the border. I am discovering a more profound sense of community in embracing deeper local friendships and serving alongside Frontera De Cristo interns and staff, university social work students, Catholic religious (nuns, priests, brothers) and lay people from both sides of the border, and whoever else happens to show up to volunteer that month.

I have been able to share beautiful moments with others, like when a man from Guerrero—recently deported from the US—beamingly showed me pictures of his baby and the little scrap of paper he carries among his few travel items that the hospital gave him with his son’s weight at the time of his birth. On the other hand, I abruptly hit burnout at times, with my head failing to function like normal and my heart becoming frustratingly numb, hardened by the pain, desperation, and exhaustion I often witness among the migrant people whom I try to support at CRM.

For the most part, I am able to sit with the hard things and accept my limited abilities and resources. I cannot do much on my own—with primitive medicals skills, intermediate Spanish, and sporadic anxiety—but I must not allow that to stop me from showing up. There is usually

nothing that I can say or do to help this migrant person in front of me out of their distressing situation, or to even slightly decrease their anguish. Sometimes the caring presence of another, to have someone to be with them and to know that they're not alone in that difficult moment, is very comforting for the soul. Offering compassion by simply sitting with another in their pain may sound purposeless or solely theoretical, but I have seen it in action—and it is powerful to behold and experience.

My time on mission is teaching and growing me and shaping my worldview. Though I don't have solutions for the complex issues here, I do see now that there is no us and them. Each man, woman, and child seeking safety, peace, and a better life could easily be my brother, sister, or parent. As I live with numerous comforts that are common in the US, I am astounded and put to shame by the geniality and zest for life that I encounter in the elderly woman selling handmade clothes on the street, the security guard, Rigo, standing in the morning frigidness, and the children whom I teach at the migrant shelter who have been technically homeless for four months and have nowhere to go. There are volunteers who do not have hot water or heat at home and yet can still show up to serve with wholehearted energy and passion. I meet migrants who have spent the night in the cold desert—and then been captured, held in detention centers, and released into Mexico—and somehow *greet me* with warmth, hope, and unshakable trust in their faithful God.



At first glance, the desert reveals barrenness and deathly extremes, but it also possesses such natural beauty to be discovered. And in the midst of the injustices and suffering happening on the border, there is joy and meaning to be found in the simple, humbling interactions with the individuals before me.