

A YEAR IN THE BORDERLANDS

by Catherine L. May, PhD

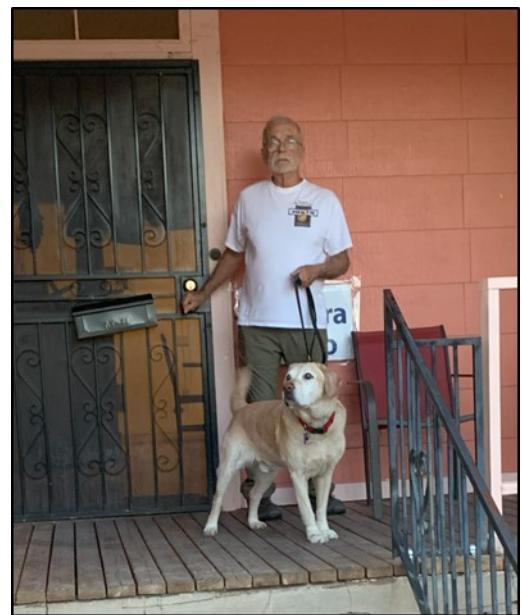
HEARING THE CALL

It was by happenstance of time and place that led Pastor Mark Adams to ask Dan Abbott (my husband) and me to accept a one-year volunteer position serving Frontera de Cristo. Mark and his wife Miriam Maldonado, both mission co-workers with the PCUSA, serve with the Frontera de Cristo border ministry in Douglas, Arizona/Agua Prieta, Sonora. Periodically, mission co-workers leave their posts for a period of time to engage in an Interpretation Assignment (IA)—traveling the width and length of the US, to tell their stories of service ministry and invite people into participation with them.

In early conversations about our responsibilities, we agreed that Dan would continue his work with Café Justo and act as liaison on the US side of the borderlands. I would take on the planning for visiting delegations along with supporting communications and outreach. Mark told us the most important part of our work was to be present with our colleagues and friends, and he was absolutely right! Not only did we see the value of being present with them, but we grew to appreciate how important their presence was in our lives.

Each week, I drove down to Douglas after worship at University Presbyterian in Tempe (Dan came every other week) and returned Wednesday in time for choir rehearsal. While in the borderlands, we stayed in a beautiful old (c.1910) house—the Frontera de Cristo house and office. We shared most of the house with a constant stream of comings and goings. It was not optimal, certainly not very private. Our sweet, old, blind Labrador retriever, Pancho, didn't mind at all... lots more people to pet him. (To this day, people still ask about Pancho).

Arriving on Sunday evening meant unpacking and settling in. Monday morning started early with Dan out on his usual walk, while Pancho and I visited the park. We walked past the old churches on church square—a group of four churches that had made the Guinness Book of World Records. Sometimes, we had enough time to read the Arizona Daily Star, a Tucson home-town-ish type of newspaper that was an enjoyable shift from Phoenix's Arizona Republic. Each Monday afternoon, I crossed into Mexico to work at the Migrant Resource Center, a welcoming and compassionate space for people returned to Mexico by the US Border Patrol.



FAITH, FLEXIBILITY, FRIENDSHIP

A major focus of my PhD dissertation had centered on the people and the work of Frontera de Cristo; I thought I really understood the organization. But there was much more to learn. The year we spent there was a gift that gave us a powerful, personal exposure to the heart and soul of the organization and the community it serves.

- We grew in our understanding of the deep faith that is foundational to all the people—staff, volunteers, guests, and clients—and the commitment which strengthens all the work that people accomplish.
- We learned that flexibility is key to each day in a binational, highly relational environment. When different languages and cultures are ever-present, it takes time. When politics impose restrictions, from poorly developed streetscapes, to restrictive banking laws, to heavily armed border crossings, it takes time. When desperation and survival and cruel deaths are part of your reality, it takes perseverance.
- Then, there were the many friends to be made—like becoming part of an ever-expanding church family. Whether staff, volunteer, or visitor, each brings gifts. Most find their time with Frontera de Cristo to be life-informing. Each Wednesday, people gather at the Café Justo y Mas (CJyM) coffee shop for a time a biblical reflection and prayer. Delegations usually have pre-selected their daily biblical passages for reflection; those are wrapped into the all-group gatherings. During weeks without delegations, the staff and volunteers read from both the Psalms and the New Testament. These gatherings became my favorite time of the week; I learned to participate in the sharing and discussion with an ever-opening heart and mind. In a conversation about Matthew 4 (how to fish for people),

a young intern fresh out of seminary, whose home was in Chiapas, recalled the challenges of fishing when her grandfather taught her how to fish. She likened those challenges to evangelism: the preparation and caution one needs to take, the difficulty and practice it takes to be successful, the reality that there are always those that get away, and the importance of knowing what to do when one is caught. She brought the parable to life.



Café Justo y Mas is an alcohol- and drug-free gathering place for the community.

Most of the churches and organizations that wanted to plan delegation visits to Douglas/Agua Prieta were unfamiliar with the experience they would be walking into. I was always amazed at how much faith they put in our ability to provide them with a safe and meaningful trip. This was a time when people were emerging from COVID and excited to travel, yet it was also a time when border violence was hitting the news. For us, that included a disappointing turn when several groups felt they needed to cancel their trip after the murders of US citizens in Matamoros (in a very different region of Mexico, far from Agua Prieta).

REFLECTION AND RENEWAL

For most, a trip to Douglas/Agua Prieta with Frontera de Cristo is a faith-based experience engaged in daily biblical reflection and prayer. It exposes each person to the realities of migration: learning at the Migrant Resource Center, sharing dinner with migrants at a shelter, and walking the migrant trail across the Sonoran Desert. Each Tuesday for more than 20 years, the Healing Our Borders Prayer Vigil has been held in Douglas, just north of the port of entry (border crossing). During the vigil, a coalition of local residents, area visitors, and online (Zoom) participants call out the names of people who died crossing the desert, as we lift a small cross with the person's name printed across it. In this way, we offer a compassionate recognition of lives tragically and horribly lost. After each name is called out, everyone responds "Presente!" One delegation participant shared that she will never read Matthew 16:24—the burden of the cross and self-denial—without recalling her experience at the vigil. Often, after time with and exposure to the migrant realities, the delegations were able to meet with the Mexican Consulate and the US Border Patrol—both essential institutions with distinct perspectives on the border region story.



A visit to Douglas/Agua Prieta cannot just be about migration. Frontera de Cristo has several partners that we work with and support. CATPSIC is a very successful drug rehabilitation program—several of the clients accompany the Sonoran migrant trail walk. My personal favorite is DouglaPrieta Trabaja, a women's cooperative that engages in permaculture gardening, sewing, and textile arts both for the members and the community. In addition, they host an Education Enrichment program for children, one of four that are part of the Frontera de Cristo ministry. Delegations love working with the children. For many Presbyterian Churches, the best-known partner of Frontera de Cristo is Café Justo. The coffee shop is located in Agua Prieta, across the street from Lily of the Valley Presbyterian Church where most delegations stay. Very often, CJyM becomes a gathering place for delegations, and it is always a place where one can find friends and familiar faces.



A delegation from St. Ignatius High School, San Francisco, visits the community garden at DouglaPrieta Trabaja



As I settle back into life away from the border, I know I will miss those friends and familiar faces. Admittedly, I finished my year physically and emotionally exhausted, and at this time, I am still recovering. Some who love me think the decision to serve was ill-considered, and perhaps they were right; but, at this time in my life and with the love of my husband sustaining me, I am grateful for the opportunity to grow in my faith, to see and experience God in richly diverse ways, and to touch lives and be touched in return. I am deeply appreciative of the support from family, friends, and my home congregation of University Presbyterian Church (particularly the Mission, Social Justice, and Peacemaking Committee). This leads me to ask, was it happenstance or sweet grace that called me to the border? □