

“FOLLOW US, WE’RE GOING THAT WAY”

by J Ron Byler, Development Executive, Mennonite World Conference

On my way to Agua Prieta in the busy Denver airport, I watched a couple I thought might be Central American migrants come off a flight and approach the arrivals/departures board. The crew from their plane came off behind them and asked in Spanish where they needed to go. When they figured out what gate, the crew said, “Follow us, we’re going that way.” As I headed to my next flight to Tucson, I wondered what it would be like if that was the kind of welcome all newcomers received in my country.

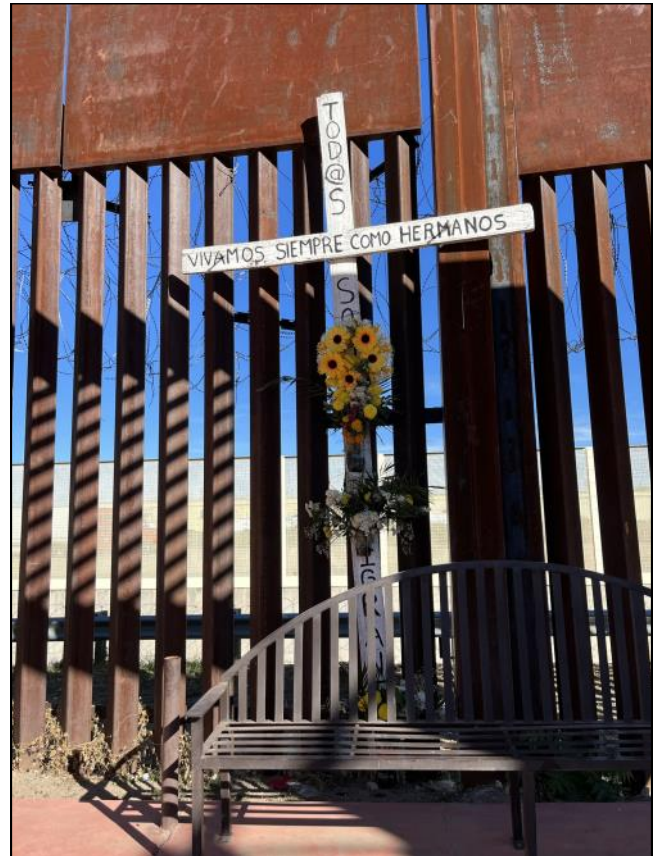


The border wall on the US side at Agua Prieta

Living as sisters and brothers is what the 20th anniversary celebration at Café Justo in Agua Prieta, Mexico, was all about. For 20 years, coffee growers in Chiapas, Mexico, have partnered with Frontera de Cristo and churches in the United States to distribute coffee across North America. “It’s a dream realized,” said one grower speaking to the crowd gathered for the celebration, “for families to receive fair wages for their product so they can stay on their land and not have to migrate north.” Said another grower, “Thanks be to God for people on both sides of the border working together, distributing coffee all over Mexico and the United States.” “Today,” said a third grower, “our older children don’t need to migrate and our younger children are healthy and can go to school.” I am grateful to Frontera de Cristo for being the midwife for this vision.

Later, we traveled south to Chiapas in southern Mexico to visit with the growers and their families. One day, we headed to the coffee fields on the back of a pickup truck and we passed many workers walking up the mountain to the fields on foot. After climbing the last stretch up the mountain ourselves, we learned about the different kinds of coffee and the care it takes to grow the beans for harvesting. Later, on our way back down the mountain, we saw young men carrying 150 lb. bags of coffee beans on their backs to the town below. It gave me a new appreciation for these growers and the skill and persistence it takes to grow these beans for distribution and our enjoyment.

Instead, walking the border region a day later in Douglas, Arizona, a 30-foot-high steel fence topped with concertina wire blocked my path into Mexico. It is as if we are shouting to all who may want to enter our country, “Stay out!” Later, when I was on the Mexican side of the border wall, I saw a cross mounted high on the wall with these words written on it: “Vivamos siempre como hermanos.” Let’s always live as brothers.



We visited a number of the growers and learned more about the coffee drying process. All the while, we were wonderfully hosted by the growers and their families. One day, they took us to visit two migrant shelters in Tapachula where the Café Justo famers provide free coffee for the guests.

In the Good Shepherd migrant shelter, Sister Olga and her staff and volunteers feed 1400 people each day from a wood-fired kitchen. People from Honduras, Haiti, Cuba, El Salvador, Venezuela and many other places find respite on their journey north to flee poverty and violence in search of a better life.

We gathered with the coffee growers and their families for one final celebration. As these leaders recounted their story and shared a vision for the future, I said a prayer of thanks for these families and prayed that their story of achieving sustainable livelihoods would be replicated elsewhere.



On the final morning of our trip after breakfast in my household, the two young girls in the family drew and colored hearts for us as a gift and I knew part of my heart would remain with them as well.

We are truly sisters and brothers—coffee growers and their families, churches in the United States, migrants crossing the border, Café Justo staff, and volunteers. Thank you, Frontera de Cristo, for bringing us together and helping us to care for each other. ☐



Photo courtesy
David Bonilla

COLORS OF LIFE ON THE BORDER

Photos courtesy J Ron Byler unless otherwise noted



About this trip: Ron Byler was one of 18 members of Frontera de Cristo's Border-to-Border Delegation, "Coffee, Migration, & Faith," who traveled to Tapachula, Chiapas, in November 2022, to visit coffee farming families

and learn more about the process of growing coffee. If you are interested in joining our next delegation in November 2023, please email mark@fronteradecristo.org to get more information about the trip and have your name added to our list of prospective travelers.

