Mission Trip to Las Cruces

October 2018

Five of us from the First United Methodist Church, Los Alamos, traveled to Las Cruces, NM on a Fall Tuesday in mid-October 2018. We had to go on a Tuesday, as that is the day when the El Calvario UMC received 15 families released from the ICE facility in El Paso, Texas. Every Tuesday families come to the church to rest before they travel on to their next stop in the asylum seeking process. Our primary purpose for this trip was to relieve the church workers who participate in their asylum seeker ministry, up to four days per week, every week. Secondarily, we hoped to be able to connect with the families to show them the love of Christ.

We arrived at the church in the late afternoon and were shown around the facilities. There is a large room used as a storage closet for donated clothing and a laundry room where a washing machine had been installed. Another room has the sorted clothing where the families can choose clothing for their families. In addition to various offices, one room is devoted to supplies put into travel back packs for each family (diapers, wet wipes, toiletries and a small fleece blanket). The kitchen was in full swing with volunteers preparing a hot meal for the arriving guests. A large area next to the kitchen becomes either a dining room or a sleeping room depending upon the function needed. The sanctuary was lit up for the incoming group.

After our tour, we heard someone say “The bus is here” and we all went out to greet the families. Out from the bus came 14 women and one man with their children, ages one to nine. Their faces were exhausted, stressed and anxious. They had all just spent five days in the ICE detention facility. I tried to hug or pat each one, saying ‘bienvenidos’. My heart was already broken. After a formal welcome and prayers in the sanctuary the families were ushered into the dining hall for a hot meal. Our group tried to help by serving them and later doing clean-up in the kitchen; then we sat with them for dinner, trying to communicate with them in our atrocious Spanish. M\_\_\_\_ , the woman I sat next to, began to speak to me in her very soft voice. The families had spent the last five days in an ICE cage: 30 people to a cage. They were given one bottle of water per person a day, one diaper per child a day, and no more than one meal a day (if the guard was ‘nice’). Everyone slept on the concrete floor, with only a mylar blanket for warmth. One young boy was so hungry that he gobbled up all of this food, and then vomited, unused to such plenty.

After dinner, the several families went to a Lutheran church or another sponsor in the Las Cruces area. We volunteers assisted in helping the 10 remaining families choose warm clothes (all were from Central American countries and wore summer clothing). The El Calvario UMC has travel consultants who use ICE software to prepare travel documents, as they have no driver licenses or passports, so these serve as identification, travel information, and their court date for their asylum hearing. All of the families had family already in the U.S. to whom they were going. The U.S. family members had to pay for the bus or plane tickets. The buses fill up fast, so some families have to stay at the church for up to four days before making their connections. The church feeds them three meals a day, provides shelter, rest and opportunity for the children to play.

ECUMC has one shower, so after getting their new clean clothes and travel documents we set up a rotation for families taking showers. The mothers also used the washing machine, so they could take clean clothes with them. Then the dining room was transformed into a sleeping area; we set up cots for each woman and child, and provided sheets, blankets and pillows. By then we old people went to bed, but a group of college kids arrived earlier and they stayed up a while with them had listened to the stories of why such a long and dangerous journey was attempted. The mothers talked about their other children or husbands left behind, or husbands they were going to see, after a long separation. One mother did speak about fleeing from a gang which was trying to recruit her nine year old son. M\_\_\_\_ said that though they met many bad people on their journey, often the police they encountered were as bad, if not worse. All of them risked their lives and the lives of their children for a better life and reunification of their families.

The next day we provided a hot breakfast and helped those families leaving that day assemble their belongings, including the travel backpacks. The mothers were offered extra diapers for the journey and I was struck by how they only asked for one. We assured them that they would be traveling for many hours, if not days, so we had to urge them to take a bundle of diapers. Since the church had not yet installed a dryer, two of us went in search of a laundromat to dry the clothes.

We noticed how tiny the women and children were, the one-year olds looking like six-month U.S. children. Even our shortest volunteer towered over all but one of the women (she was my size, 5’2”). As we were watching the children, a tiny little girl was cautiously walking between the table and chair legs, near her mother. We ask the mother when she had started crawling. “Oh, no crawling” her mother said. She explained “well she is at that age when everything goes into her mouth, so we don’t let her crawl on the dirt floor” [of their house]. So many blessings we have that are not appreciated.

By the second day the children to relax, but stayed within sight of their mothers at all times. We brought along a doll playhouse which we put into the designated play corner of the room. A little boy and girl had a great time playing with Ken and Barbie. We learned lager they were pretending Ken was “poppi” and Barbie was “mommi”. Poppi was welcoming mommi and her children into their new home in the U.S.

We pray that these families did have a welcoming experience when they reached their final destinations. We also pray that the judges who hear their asylum testimonies will grant them the opportunity to live here in peace. May all of us very fortunate citizens be merciful and kind to these disadvantaged fellow humans. Let your grace and peace shine upon all of us.

Photos by Jeanne Hope Gibson