

Lessons from an Immigration Tour

Written by Joyce E. Hall

Members of the Mennonite Church USA Constituency Leadership Council were invited to join an immigration learning tour in Tucson, Arizona taking place on October 18 - 20, 2019 following the council's meetings in Phoenix, Arizona the previous two days. The learning tour was organized by the Pacific Southwest Mennonite Conference, Mennonite Church USA, and West Coast Mennonite Central Committee. As council members, Enos Tice and I decided to join the tour and take the opportunity to learn about immigration border issues.

On Friday evening after the Constituency Leadership Council meetings, twenty-two tour participants carpooled to Tucson. Some of the cars stopped on the way to Tucson to view the outside of the Eloy Detention Center and offer a prayer for the approximately 1,500 immigrants detained there.



PHOTO BY JOYCE E. HALL
Play area at Casa Alitas

On Saturday, we learned about nonprofit organizations. The first was Casa Alitas, a shelter run by Catholic Community Services of Southern Arizona. Casa Alitas offers hospitality to migrant families who have gone through ICE processing for temporary humanitarian parole in order to stay in the U.S. until their asylum request is processed. The families at Casa Alitas usually stay one to three days. The shelter is run by volunteers and can house up to 200 people at a time. We were able to tour the facility and listen to a presentation by the volunteer director. The volunteers have made the center a visually welcoming place by providing an atmosphere that does not appear institutional. There were numerous pieces of artwork on the walls, many done by children as they processed their experiences of fleeing their homes. Donated clothes were neatly arranged in an area where the guests could choose some pieces of clothing to help them on their way to a new start. Through a translator, we met a family of three and heard the father recount how he

had been shot five times in their country of Guatemala. After his recovery, the family fled to the U.S. in search of a better life. Our group prayed with this family, as they were going to be transitioning to life in Michigan with a sponsor.

We also learned about the Florence Immigration and Refugee Rights Project (**FIRRP**), a nonprofit organization which provides free legal services to people who are in immigration custody in Arizona. We learned that there are more than 6,500 people in detention in Arizona. The organization presenter explained that immigrants are twice as likely to win asylum when represented by an attorney; however, most immigrants do not have an attorney with about 86% of them representing themselves.



PHOTO BY JOYCE E. HALL
Clothing for guests at Casa Alitas

Next, we heard a presentation by a representative of Tucson Samaritans, a group of people of conscience and faith who give humanitarian aid to migrants in distress in the Tucson Sector of the Arizona/Mexico border. They daily travel to the desert and provide water, food, emergency medical supplies, communication equipment, maps and individual traveler-packs containing items necessary to survive in the desert. We learned of the U.S. policy of "prevention through deterrence" in making it extremely

difficult and dangerous to travel through the desert. We saw pictures of the different types of physical barriers at the border and learned of the ATV patrols, guards on horseback, trained dogs, surveillance towers, drones, helicopters and ground sensors to keep people from crossing the border and traveling through the desert. The presenter told us of patrols slashing the plastic water vats which the Samaritans placed in the desert. We heard the story about the Samaritans finding a 13 year old boy traveling in the desert by himself. The Samaritans found him just before a vigilante group traveled through the same area. Most sobering, was a map showing red dots representing the 3,339 migrant deaths within the seven counties north of the border near Tucson between 1999 and 2018.

On Sunday, we attended the morning worship service at Shalom Mennonite Fellowship in Tucson. I could feel the spirit of support the congregation offers to immigrants by welcoming, embracing, and inviting the stranger to join their congregation in following Jesus. After the service, we heard a story from Rocio, a Bolivian woman who attends Shalom Mennonite Fellowship. She told of her human trafficking experience working in California for six months without getting paid, being lied to and ultimately not having a way back to Bolivia. Rocio was shackled and taken into custody because of overstaying her visa. Eventually she was able to obtain legal help through FIRR (mentioned earlier in this article). She also was able to make connections with visitors from Shalom Mennonite Fellowship. Rocio was in detention almost two years, before her bond was posted by friends of Shalom. She eventually won her case. Rocio lives and works in Tucson, and she is involved with a detention visitation program called Casa Mariposa.

Rocio challenged each person in our group to take action and choose a way to help immigrants. She listed the following ways as possibilities:

- Visit a detention center
- Have a card party to make cards of support to be sent to detained immigrants
- Sponsor an immigrant
- Offer sanctuary
- Work to change laws
- Raise money for bonds
- Raise money for lawyers or offer legal assistance
- Donate to programs (Casa Mariposa and others)
- Offer work to immigrants
- Accompany immigrants to court

I'm grateful for the opportunity to experience the Tucson immigration learning tour, which enlightened me to what is happening at the US/Mexican border. What specifically stays with me are the pictures and stories. Now, the challenge for me is to decide in what way I can make a difference and then act.