



WHY DO THEY LEAVE HOME?

Gail Heisel



courtesy of Gail Heisel

Learning from a border pilgrimage

by Phil Hofer and Gail Heisel

Four members of La Verne (Calif.) Church of the Brethren joined a group of 13 people from the southern California area for an overnight visit to the border of Calexico, Calif., and Mexicali, State of Sonora, Mexico. Our visit was hosted by Justice for Immigrants Seeking Asylum and the Interfaith Movement for Human Integrity.

The first stop was Calexico United Methodist Church, where pastor Baldwin Avendaño and his small congregation provide clothing, housing, and food to migrants who enter the US after they have applied for asylum in Mexico. Avendaño said that some 80 people a day are released by the US

Border Patrol and an additional 12 people a day are released from the immigration detention center nearby. Many go directly to family, friends, or other sponsors. Some stay in Calexico for a day or two. They can receive assistance from his church as well as a network of other providers. One room in the church is devoted to clothing and the pastor raises funds for meals and housing in local motels. Some also stay in the homes of local residents. Unfortunately, the city of Calexico has not permitted the church to use its facilities as a shelter.

The following day, Sisters Suzanne Janro and Lisa Busher of Border Compassion accompanied us across the border on foot. Then we took taxis

to Cobina Posada Del Migrante, one of a number of shelters in Mexicali. Border Compassion works with Cobina as a link between resources on the US side and the needs on the border in Mexico. The shelter houses women, children, and some men, providing hospitality to asylum seekers while they wait to hear about an interview with the US immigration service.

We visited the shelter on Children's Day, a special day in Mexico, and we shared art materials with the children as some members of our group encouraged creative projects. We know the children have experienced much pain. We also saw their resilience, and that of their families. Others of our group listened to the stories of the adults, as they shared the reasons why they came to the border, hoping to enter the United States. A number of the residents have had their applications for asylum turned down and are considering their options. Few can consider returning to their homes. They are fleeing for a reason.

Why do they leave? There are as many stories as families.

Many in Cobina are from the Mexican states of Guerrero and Michoacán, where the drug cartels and gangs have wreaked havoc on daily lives, particularly those of families with young men and families with financial means. One member of our group met Elfega, who owned some land in the state of Guerrero. Gangs told her she must turn over her land to them. Three sons had left before she did, somehow finding their way into the US. Elfega and her daughter fled—her daughter locating elsewhere in Mexico, Elfega at the border.

This was Phil Hofer's fourth visit to shelters and centers of help in border



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cities. Each visit reminds him of the great needs of our neighbors, their strengths in seeking safety and security, and the efforts of people and organizations to meet those needs.

This visit reminded all of us that those needs continue, especially when the push of violence in other countries meets the push of stricter immigration policies by the US government. The visit reminded us of the need for continued advocacy for government policies that

recognize our collective humanitarian responsibilities, as people flee their homes to seek safety and shelter.

As we seek to be the hands, feet, and heart of Jesus, let us all care, give, and work toward a humanitarian response to the needs of our neighbors. **M**

Phil Hofer and Gail Heisel are from La Verne Church of the Brethren in southern California. Heisel serves on the Program and Arrangements Committee of Annual Conference.