

# Fellowship Southwest Pastor Stays in Mexico to Help Refugees

Lorenzo Ortiz, a Texas pastor who operates three immigrant shelters in Nuevo Laredo, Mexico, stayed behind when the U.S. and Mexican governments closed the border to all “nonessential” travel at midnight Saturday, March 21.

Mutual concern about the transmission of the COVID-19 virus led U.S. and Mexican policymakers to shut down border crossings partially, from the Gulf of Mexico to the Pacific Ocean.

Officials of both governments stressed the travel restrictions would not impede lawful trade and commerce, but crossings would be limited in order to curtail transmission of the coronavirus.

On March 20, when rumors of an imminent border shutdown were circulating, Ortiz’s daughter, Ruth Ortiz, said, “We are making arrangements to organize ourselves and the leaders in the refugee centers to better assist these families.”

Late that night as the deadline approached, she reported that her father, a U.S. citizen, still was in Mexico, helping immigrants.

Saturday morning, she texted, “He did not make it, brother. He will stay across helping these families. He says it’s chaos with so many people, and he’s transporting them from one place to another. He’s taking some of them to Monterrey (two and one-half hours from Nuevo Laredo) and others to a shelter. There were so many people last night, and he wanted to see where they could be hosted. That’s why he was not able to make it.”

Later that day, Lorenzo Ortiz headed back to Laredo, but only to pick up a truck so he could continue transporting migrant families in Mexico, Ruth Ortiz said.

“My dad will not choose to stay here in Laredo,” she said. “He wants to stay across (in Mexico) to help the need. All the immigrants’ asylum hearings got canceled, so there are too many people in the refugee centers. ... We would appreciate prayers since we’re not sure when he will be able to cross back home.”

Lorenzo Ortiz has ministered courageously since the latest immigration crisis

flared up in 2018.

Initially, asylum-seekers - most of them from Central America, but others from South America, Cuba and even Africa - crossed into the United States and waited north of the border as their cases progressed through the immigration system.

Almost overnight, U.S. border towns received a deluge of refugees. As a border pastor, Ortiz invited them to shelter in his church building.

Immigrants filled the facility, sleeping in and under pews and even around the pulpit area.

Jorge Zapata, associate coordinator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Texas, heard about the church's endeavor, and that's how Fellowship Southwest's Immigrant Relief Ministry got started.

Fellowship Southwest told Ortiz's and the refugees' story, and supporters provided funds that enabled the tiny church to buy groceries and supplies and to pay skyrocketing utility bills.

When fatigue set in, the church asked Ortiz to discontinue the ministry and dismissed him when he said he must continue to serve the refugees. Without a church building, Ortiz moved the ministry to his home.

He and his wife, Oralia, and their family fed about 1,000 refugees a month for three months from their kitchen.

Immigrants camped out all over their yard and participated in nightly worship. Fellowship Southwest and other groups helped buy food and supplies to keep the ministry going.

Later, the U.S. government implemented what it calls Migrant Protection Protocols.

Also known as "Remain in Mexico," the policy requires asylum-seekers who are not Mexican to wait in Mexico as they work through the asylum process.

So, the immigrants vanished from the Ortizes' home but wound up on the streets of Nuevo Laredo, the most dangerous city in North America because of cartels, which prey on refugees.

Ortiz has set up three shelters - essentially safe houses - in Nuevo Laredo, where he welcomes refugees when he rescues them from the streets.

Fellowship Southwest helps support this ministry every month and in just the past week sent funds to buy washers and dryers, plus dining tables and chairs, for two of the shelters.

His decision to remain in Mexico is consistent with his ongoing ministry to refugees, which has ignored danger from Mexican cartels every time he has crossed the border and which has demanded daily attention without a break.

He has requested additional funds from Fellowship Southwest to accommodate additional feeding programs in Monterrey and Saltillo, Mexico, as well as to feed newly arrived refugees in Nuevo Laredo.

Ortiz is part of a loose network of pastors and ministers operating shelters all along the border. They include:

- Carlos Navarro, pastor of Iglesia Bautista West Brownsville in Brownsville, Texas. The church operates an immigrant respite center, which ministers to refugees after they get papers for their final asylum court date and pass through the city to live with sponsors elsewhere in the United States. Fellowship Southwest provides ongoing funds for operations and is helping the church construct a new respite shelter, complete with permanent showers, sleeping facilities and dining room.
- Rogelio Pérez, pastor of Iglesia Bautista Capernaum in Brownsville. Pérez and members of his church have been crossing the border several times a week to minister in the massive tent camp, home of 2,000 or more refugees, in downtown Matamoros. They provide meals and other supplies and lead in worship. Fellowship Southwest provides monthly grants to buy food, diapers, baby wipes, medicine and other supplies.
- Israel Rodriguez, pastor of Primera Iglesia Bautista in Piedras Negras, Mexico. The church operates immigrant shelters from its downtown campus, where they care for Central Americans, and its suburban campus and school, where they house immigrants from South America and Cuba. Thanks to a grant from the Prichard Family Foundation, Fellowship Southwest has committed to buy all the food for these shelters for about two years.

- Shon Young, associate pastor of City Church in Del Rio, Texas, and chair of the Val Verde Border Humanitarian Coalition. Young has led a ministry to immigrants who have amassed in or passed through Acuña, Mexico, including a steady stream of refugees from Congo, Angola and other African nations. Fellowship Southwest has not provided funds for this effort but has collaborated. The border closing ramped up desperation on the part of refugees, he said, noting, “I’ve talked to some of the people I’ve been ministering to, and one family’s plan is to cross tomorrow through the river. Their intention was to wait for permission, but they’ve been waiting since June for this.”
- Rosalio Sosa, pastor of Iglesia Bautista Tierra de Oro in El Paso, Texas, and leader of Red de Albergues Para Migrantes (Migrant Shelter Network) in Juarez. They operate almost 20 shelters, mostly in Juarez, but also as far as 100 miles west in the desert, in the village of Palomas. Fellowship Southwest provides funds for food, rent for a shelter that houses Cubans, rents a distribution center, provides monthly operational funds for the Palomas shelter and has bought appliances for that shelter.

Sosa reported an influx of refugees, who had been allowed to cross into the United States as they prepared to ship out to stay with U.S. sponsors.

Because of the COVID-19 virus, the U.S. government is deporting them to Mexico, and Sosa is seeking shelter for 40 newcomers with more on the way.

- Juvenal González, a church starter in Tijuana. Fellowship Southwest has helped González and his local network of churches provide breakfast at the huge El Barretal immigrant camp and helped build showers in that facility.

González has reported a new twist to the crisis: Because of the pandemic, churches in Tijuana are shut down at least until June; the 20 pastors serving the immigrants need rice, beans, eggs and cooking oil to feed their own families. Fellowship Southwest has promised to send funds to support the pastors as well as refugees.

These pastors receive ongoing support from two Cooperative Baptist Fellowship workers who live in the Rio Grande Valley:

- Zapata, the CBF Texas associate coordinator, who also is the director of

the Fellowship Southwest Immigrant Relief Ministry and operates a benevolence nonprofit, Heart4Kids, in the “colonias” of the Rio Grande Valley.

- Elket Rodríguez, an attorney and minister who is CBF’s immigrant and refugee advocacy specialist.

Please pray for Lorenzo Ortiz and all the pastors on the border, as well as for their families and churches and, above all, for the asylum-seekers in camps and shelters along the border - as well as pastors in Spain and other European countries who are ministering to refugees, even as COVID-19 ravages their homelands.

Refugees everywhere are particularly vulnerable to the pandemic encircling the globe.

If you would like to support the relief and shelter ministries of these pastors on the border, [click here](#).