



Border Lines

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When members of Westminster Presbyterian Church of Austin traveled to McAllen and the Humanitarian Respite Center, they learned that meeting basic human needs for thousands requires a miracle for the many saints in long lines.

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“The image that stays with me from this trip to the border is the lines,” Jill Clark reported to members of our church, Westminster Presbyterian in Austin, after our recent spring break mission trip to the Humanitarian Respite Center in McAllen. Jill has been to McAllen to serve at the Respite Center ten times, so she’s well-versed in the rhythms of welcoming

refugees there. She also knows that each trip is different, and this trip, taken March 17-20, 2019, was characterized by lines.

We arrived at the Respite Center at 5:30 on Sunday afternoon, hoping to help serve dinner at 6 pm. By the time we arrived, a line was already forming at the edge of the tent from which dinner would be served. And no wonder – Respite Center staff told us there were about 1,000 people staying there that day. Large numbers of asylum-seekers were crossing the border in mid-March (and still are as I write this in early April), causing ICE to release record numbers from detention centers and into the care of the good people at the Humanitarian Respite Center. Adding to the chaos, spring breakers crowded the bus system, forcing refugees to stay at the Respite Center longer than usual while they waited for a seat on a bus that would unite them with family and friends in others parts of the country.

Our group got into position to help serve dinner. Mayra Garza, who organizes a large group of volunteers to provide the evening meal at the Respite Center each day, used a portable speaker to give directions and asked one of the asylum-seekers to pray for our meal. Then the buffet line opened and our work began. While Spanish-language worship songs poured out of the speaker, some of us poured drinks: “Café? Jugo? Té?” Some of us helped parents with their hands full of children navigate the line. And some of us helped dish ground beef with vegetables, rice, beans, and macaroni from coolers onto Styrofoam plates until they nearly reached their breaking point. I was in charge of the beans. Every time I neared the bottom of a cooler, another one would appear. The food in those coolers seemed to magically multiply. It felt like feeding the 5,000. Three hours later, we had finally fed everyone in the line, and





there was a cooler of ground beef left over. Not exactly twelve baskets, but it still felt like a miracle.

The lines continued throughout our trip. Not just for meals, but also for the four bathroom stalls at the Center, two for men and two for women. Lines snaked from the rooms where clothing and supplies are handed out, from the makeshift ticketing counter at the front desk, and out the door as buses from the detention centers dropped off new groups of asylum-seekers. People patiently waited in line at the Salvation Army shower trailer parked out back, so many that by the second day of our trip, Center staff had closed the showers to focus on making sure everyone's most immediate needs were being met. Our group of volunteers spent much of our time in a room where a human assembly line churned out endless ham and cheese sandwiches and snack bags for folks to take with them on the bus.

Honestly, the lines were overwhelming. I, too, had been to the Respite Center before, but when there were one or two



hundred people waiting there, not a thousand. A thousand men, women, and children, hungry, tired, in need of diapers or medicine or shoelaces (did you know that asylum-seekers' shoelaces are taken away in detention?). A thousand men, women, and children who thought that leaving home and family and walking a thousand miles to try to make a life in a foreign country was a better option for their families than staying home in Honduras or Guatemala or El Salvador. A thousand people relieved to be on this side of the Rio Grande, this side of detention. A thousand thank yous for scoops of beans, cups of coffee, clean pairs of underwear.

One day, when our group showed up to the Respite Center at just the right moment, one of the Catholic sisters who works there asked us, "Do you believe in divine providence?" Yes, we do. Somehow, through the hands and donations of many, God provides food, shelter, and welcome to people who need it.