

“Heartbreak at the Border”

A Testimony of Changes and Impacts When MPP Came to Tucson Border Sector By Pastor and Shelter Volunteer, Rev. Ailsa Guardiola González, Pastor, First Christian Church, Tucson, AZ



(Images from an Arizona shelter—well supplied and ready to welcome, but without migrants allowed to enter.)

It was April of 2019 when we received our first guests: families seeking asylum in need of a temporary place to stay until they travel to their sponsor. For a week each month since then, we continued to offer hospitality with a place to sleep, launder clothes, eat, relax on a couch, and make phone calls to family. Most importantly, we provided a place for families to feel human again. A place to restore dignity and recover a sense of value. A place that says, “No matter what you have encountered, you matter.” A place to feel loved. Over the next months we hosted close to 300 people from a few months old to adults in their 60’s.

Then the call came. It was from the coordinator of the local shelter with whom we partner, saying, “Your overflow shelter is not needed this month. MPP is now being implemented in the Tucson sector. We don’t know what the future holds.” Our volunteers were already ready to host. The cots and play area were set up. Snacks and sandwiches for travel bags we send with the families were ready. Volunteers from our church and those from the wider community who have been helping us these months had purchased food for meals, clothing items that tend to run out, diapers, formula, and other items.

We were ready, but what we had dreaded for months now became reality. Parents who feared for the future of their children, had risked everything to seek their safety, and endured a dangerous journey to the U.S. border would now confront one more barrier. After legally presenting themselves to U.S. officials to seek asylum and being processed, they would now be released on the Mexico side of the border to await their U.S. court

hearing. However, this court hearing will not take place anywhere near the Tucson sector, but miles away in El Paso, TX. Moreover, they will not have one court hearing but a series of hearings with wait time in between.

We are heartbroken for these families. Heartbroken because the stories of prior guests have taught us all that people endure to make a decision and complete a trip. Heartbroken because we know there is room here in Tucson, in our shelters, in our church, and in shelters across the Southwest. Heartbroken because of the danger in which this policy places families. First, they are released in an impoverished place with thousands of people already waiting to present themselves to U.S. officials. Shelters there cannot house everyone. Second, they are targets upon release because U.S. officials send them back with their belongings in plastic bags and no shoelaces (shoelaces, bras, and belts are taken from them in custody). This makes them easily identifiable to those who wish to extort them. Third, once they travel to El Paso and have their first court hearing, they must continue waiting on the Mexico side for their other hearings. Will families be safe waiting in Juarez, a city known for its violence, extortion of vulnerable people, and lack of resources for the number of similar families already there? Will families instead attempt to travel back to the border with Arizona to be safe, even if it means needing more resources every time they have a court date?



MPP adds one more layer to the injustices that strip away the dignity of these families. It sends people back into Mexico more vulnerable than when they presented themselves at the U.S. border. We must speak out against this policy, because our faith claims something different—that every individual is created as good and valuable, because we are created in the image of God. Our faith affirms the sanctity of every life. We must

keep working until this is the truth of how every person experiences life in this world and on our border.

For more ways you can help end harmful MPP policies, see www.Faith4Asylum.com & follow #Faith4Asylum on Twitter

Why Are Shoelaces an Important Symbol in Support of Asylum Seekers?

Returning Families to Mexico Delivers Them to Traffickers

Display a Shoelace, Urge Protection for Asylum Seekers

Policies called “Migrant Protection Protocols;” sometimes referred to as “Remain in Mexico” started on January 29, 2019, and have returned over 56,000 migrants seeking protections to Mexico during the first year. Among this number were at least 16,000 children and more than 500 infants in the first 10 months of the program.



Why are shoelaces an important symbol to show our support for asylum seekers being kept away from needed protection under “MPP”?

In December 2019, a network of 31 border shelters on the US side met in Laredo, Texas, and shared this statement:

*“As border shelters, we are ready to provide places of safety and welcome to asylum seekers. We know that when the US government returns families to Mexico to await court dates, the very process of return identifies them as targets for organized crime and heightens their risk of trafficking. **US officials remove asylum seekers’ shoelaces purportedly so that they don’t harm themselves while in detention. But when they are sent back to Mexico, the cartels identify families with missing shoelaces as easy prey for kidnapping and trafficking.** These unintended ties between US border policy and cartel violence harm families and strengthen organized crime. According to Human Rights First, there are 636 publicly reported cases of violent attacks against asylum seekers returned under MPP, and the vast majority of such attacks are not reported. We know from our firsthand experience that we can avoid feeding such violence by allowing families to seek asylum from within the US, instead of returning them to Mexico. We, the representatives of 31 shelters are ready and eager to welcome asylum-seeking families. We oppose US government practice and policy that instead subject them to suffering and call on the US Administration and Congress to immediately end MPP.”*
(Contact: Teresa Cavendish, 520-670-0800, teresac@ccs-soaz.org)

Faith Communities have also seen and understand the importance of Shoelaces, and their connections with asylum seekers:

Under MPP policies, hundreds of Central American migrants who sought safety in America have been returned to Mexico including hundreds of families, women, and children. When we visited one of the border-bridges that links El Paso to Ciudad Juarez, our host took us to a receiving area run by Mexican immigration authorities. There we had the opportunity to greet Central Americans being returned from El Paso where their plea for safety for themselves and their children fell on deaf ears. Almost to a person they were turned back and would be forced to remain in Mexico until their scheduled day in court. It might be 6 weeks, even 6 months or longer before they had their chance to make their case for asylum.

They came into the tent with nothing; all their belongings, including their shoelaces, having been taken from them by U.S. Customs and border protection. We joined the volunteers who greeted the deeply disappointed asylum seekers with a smile and a simple bag lunch. We offered clothing, toiletries, diapers for the babies and scrunchies for the little girls. By far and away, the most popular item was shoelaces. There are few options for shelter in Juarez and fewer opportunities to support families. Churches have opened a few shelters but need far out paces the ability of the people of Ciudad Juarez to welcome these migrants. Migrants stuck in Mexico are easy prey for the unscrupulous, the human traffickers, and the criminal syndicates. Kidnapping, rape,

and murder are all too common.”--Ann Scholz, SSND, PhD, Associate Director for Social Mission

“MPP adds one more layer to the injustices that strip away the dignity of asylum seeking families. It sends people back into Mexico more vulnerable than when they presented themselves at the US border, as US officials send them back with their belongings in plastic bags and no shoelaces (shoelaces, bras, and belts are taken from them in custody) --making them easily identifiable to those who wish to extort them. We must speak out against this policy, because our faith claims something different—that every individual is created as good and valuable, because we are created in the image of God. Our faith affirms the sanctity of every life. We must keep working until this is the truth of how every person experiences life in this world and on our border.—
Rev. Ailsa Guardiola González, Pastor, First Christian Church, Tucson, AZ

For more info., go to: www.Faith4Asylum.com, hold vigils in your area, and ACT to END MPP! #Faith4Asylum