

Samaritans at the Border

A Covenant pastor tells how one group of Christians is responding to undocumented immigrants trying to enter the country.

DAN JOHNSON

On the Arivaca Road we encountered six immigrants who asked directions to “Arizona.” They were not drug mules or gang members. They were shy, quiet, humble young men in their late teens and early twenties. They had lost their backpacks in the desert and had only what they were wearing and some brackish water from a cattle pond. As they accepted the Gatorade and energy bars we gave them, I was impressed by the quality of their humanity and gentleness. They were exhausted, sleep-deprived, and disoriented.

They knew that if they stayed in the desert they would die. They knew that if they stayed on the road the Border Patrol would pick them up. The hope of getting a job and being able to send money back to their families was lost.

While they were eating, a Border Patrol truck passed—then stopped and backed up. The men made no attempt to run; rather, they seemed resigned. The Border Patrol agent treated them with respect, allowed them to finish their nourishment, and loaded them into the truck. There was no impatience or malice.



A volunteer with the Samaritans told this story as a typical account of giving aid to an illegal border crosser in the Tucson Corridor, the deadliest region of the Arizona/Mexico border.

The Samaritans are a faith-based organization that takes water, food, and medical supplies into the harsh desert expanse of Arizona, looking for border crossers under duress. The Samaritans are known for their patrols, for their willingness to drive through paved and unpaved roads searching for the lost and distressed. They have one objective: to keep people alive.

June 6, 6:30 a.m. Four of us gather in the parking lot of Southside Presbyterian Church. We load plastic canisters of nonperishable food, medical supplies, and a cooler of ice and drinks into a Ford Ranger. We head straight into the throat of the desert. At this early hour it is already hot. The moment the sun rises in the Sonoran Desert of Arizona, the temperature rises like an airliner at takeoff. We are instructed to keep our eyes peeled for anyone alongside the road.

The desert is deadly. Tucson averages seventy days a year over 100 degrees Fahrenheit, and that is moderate compared to the border areas. People tend to stay indoors, unless they are desperate. Most border crossers hire a guide, called a “coyote,” for \$2,000 to \$3,000. The coyotes often lie to the border crossers, claiming that the journey to Tucson or Phoenix is a one-day hike. In reality, it takes a minimum of three days. It is impossible to carry enough water for the journey. If the temperature is over 100 degrees, an individual sweats some fifteen liters of fluid every twenty-four hours, and that liquid must be replenished. Many drink from cattle tanks along the way. Then they get sick. Then they get left behind. Then they die.

We have a nurse who is traveling with us, as most teams do. I ask her about heat related illnesses. She says the symptoms of dehydration and heat

stroke include severe headache, nausea, cramps, confusion, and irritability. She usually asks a distressed border crosser, “When was the last time you urinated?” If it has been longer than twenty-four hours, they are in peril.

When I asked what she does for heat stroke victims, she says, “I give them a capful of water. If they don’t vomit, I give another, then another.”



A Samaritan nurse offers assistance to a border crosser.

Eventually through water, ice packs, and shade, the core temperature of the body is reduced. She says that most border crossers die because they are left behind. They may have sprained an ankle or broken a bone hiking on rough trails at night. Sometimes their feet are completely raw from blisters. They have to stop, but the group may go on without them. Those are the ones we seek.

After an hour’s drive from Tucson, we disembark at a low bridge. Our leader tells us that the bridge has been a hiding place in the past. We crawl all around it, and hike a few hundred yards up and down the dry wash. We see no one. But we do see hundreds of plastic bottles and other debris everywhere. Footprints are pressed into the sand, indicating recent walkers. This

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is noted by our team’s secretary who will keep a record of the day’s events.

We continue our search. We drive past Baboquivari Peak, regarded as sacred to the Tohono O’odham Indians of the area. We

are at the edge of their reservation. We stop at a water tank maintained by the Humane Borders organization. No signs of life. We make several other

stops, searching ravines and riverbeds.

Near Arivaca, we encounter the Border Patrol. We have seen their trucks and agents often, but here we see that they have arrested a dozen or so young men, some of them teenagers, perhaps Indians from the remote regions of Mexico. They are in chains and are being transferred from the truck into a Wackenhut bus to be driven back to the border. This is “voluntary return.” The crossers are processed and dropped off in Nogales, Mexico, a border town, in a practice dubbed “catch and release.” Seventy percent of these people will try to return. The Border Patrol has several initiatives to discourage these repeat attempts, including formal charges

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and removal, penalties, jail time, and returning families to their homes in remotes villages.

Though we Samaritans have found no one this day, the Border Patrol arrests 1,000 crossers a day. Eight thousand agents patrol in trucks, ATVs, and on horseback.

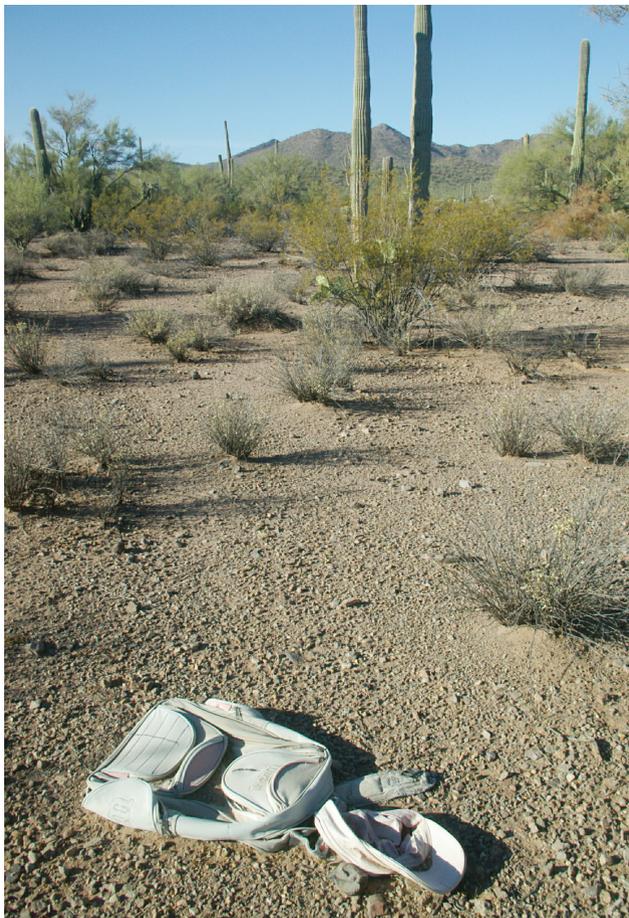
Our team leader approaches the agents. She says, “We have food and water. We are willing to help these men.” The agent dismisses her quickly with the words, “Everything is under control.” When she returns to our truck, an emotional discussion ensues between veteran Samaritans regarding the conduct of Border Agents. One feels that the agents are heartless abusers of authority. Another respects them, saying, “They just do their job. We do ours.”

Though stories of abuse and violence exist, my limited contact with agents has been positive. One agent told me, “I cannot tell you how many of my lunches I have given to a famished child found in this no-man’s land.”

The Samaritans abide by the law. They are careful to not aid and abet. They are trained to encounter crossers with wisdom and sensitivity. They approach slowly. They speak slowly, and each group usually includes a Spanish speaker. They assess and offer whatever they have in terms of food or supplies. They tell people where they are (“You are not in Florida”). They do not give maps, they never transport crossers, and they do not make decisions for people. “People’s own mistakes are usually better than the ones we make for them,” they say.

The Samaritans do not practice civil disobedience, but “civil initiative.” Civil initiative is aiding the suffering *and* being accountable to the legal order. They do not evade,

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deceive, or seize power. They cooperate with Border Agents.

We eat lunch in the small town of Arivaca and then drive straight into the forest of mesquite trees and broom bushes that cover the Tucson sector. We turn and follow a dirt road for miles. We look for trails, eventually stopping at one. We exit and our leader says, “Let’s follow this one.”

After coating ourselves in sun block, we take packs of food and water and head off. It is now 105 degrees. After a quarter-mile hike, we find a crosser camp heaped with bot-

ties, backpacks, and trash. Clothes are everywhere: pants, panties, jackets, and socks. Much of the debris is children’s stuff: diapers, toys, and satchels. There are no crossers. I pick up a child’s muddy shoe and think about my own children. Our leader tells us that this is a drop point. A coyote with a truck will pick them up nearby. The crossers shed their old clothes

and their old lives. They step into new clothes and a new life, for good or for ill.

Our group searches several hundred yards from the camp. I head down a wash on my own. I wonder what I am doing in this God-forsaken place, and I recall the verse I read in Isaiah 41 a week earlier: “The poor and needy search for water, but there is none; their tongues are parched with thirst. But I the LORD will answer them; I, the God of Israel, will not forsake them” (v. 17, TNIV).

I wonder about the border crossers who must have huddled at that camp. I wonder about their hopes and fears. I wonder about the children in their arms. Do they know that God will answer them? That he will not forsake them? When I rejoin the team, I look for the child’s shoe. It now sits on my office shelf between my thick theology

books. It belongs there.

I have become a Samaritan volunteer. For me, it is a humanitarian no-brainer. The numbers are staggering. More than one million people cross the border illegally every year. More than 300,000 are apprehended and returned. Approximately 300 crossers die in the desert each year. (As of October 9, 183 bodies had been found in 2008. The Samaritans, however, suspect for every one body found, there are ten that are not.)

After a long, hot day, we return to Tucson. I consider whether anyone

from my church will join me in one of these adventures. Immigration is a volatile issue nationwide and in our congregation as well. Wisdom and sensitivity is required to overcome the polarized thought processes. In the meantime, our leadership team has intentionally sought to cultivate hearts open to the poor and different ethnicities. Here are some of the ways we have tried to do this:

We have partnered with our sister church, Grace Community Covenant in Tucson, and the Pacific Southwest Conference to start a Hispanic church that ministers to the whole person.

We have taught regularly, from the pulpit and in classes, God's desire for racial and ethnic barriers to come down and for people to unite under the banner of Christ's love.

This winter we are planning a weekday class that explores, in depth, a Christian response to the immigra-

tion issue.

We have hosted international dinners and have attended racial reconciliation conferences.

We have promoted books on culture, race, and reconciliation.

We have partnered with a Hispanic church in San Luis, Mexico, and last fall, sent a team of twelve to do construction and minister to the children there. Our little church raised over \$4,000 for the project and learned about cross-cultural ministry and servanthood in the process.

We have also adopted a refugee family. Tucson is not only a mostly Hispanic city; it is also host to 500 refugees who are airlifted to the U.S. from Africa and the Middle East. The leadership team read *Of Beetles and Angels*, the inspiring story of Mawi Asgedom and his refugee family. We recently welcomed the Isse refugee family to America. The Isses are Soma-

lians who have lived in a refugee camp in Kenya for sixteen years. It has been a joy for our church family to welcome them, provide them with hospitality, clothing, and supplies, and bless their three beautiful children.

All of this is to create a spirit that is open to others despite differences in nationality and documentation. Perhaps the most mistranslated verse in the Bible is Matthew 5:48, which improperly reads, "Be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect." The word "perfect" is translated from the Greek word *telion*. In the context of the Sermon of the Mount, it means "expanding, full"—we get the word "telescope" from it. "Be magnanimous as your Father in heaven is magnanimous" is a better translation. We desire ever expanding hearts, to love in the way God our Father loves—not just those who are like us—but all who are in need. ■

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