

Lutheran Mission Matters



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Border Ministry with the Rio Grande Mission Action Council

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Abstract: Missional work and general community outreach can seem daunting for many congregations, especially those that are smaller in size and find themselves in rural communities. This article touches on how one organization created a collaborative ministry model among twelve LCMS congregations in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas. The Rio Grande Mission Action Council serves mainly to raise and empower new leaders within local congregations and support outreach efforts. The model of collaboration mentioned in this article will also speak specifically to the uniqueness of ministry in a bilingual border community.

Ministry along the border is unique in that it places you face-to-face with realities that are often highly politicized and make for sensational news stories but are not always portrayed accurately or altogether truthfully. When I received my first call as a Director of Christian Education (DCE) and accepted a very non-traditional role in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas, I was faced with those realities in very personal ways.

As I neared the end of my DCE internship year in southern California, I flew out to Texas to visit the area where I could potentially be serving. As I met leaders and members of the local congregations, I recall thinking that this was simply not the right place for me. I considered the vast differences between the larger urban cities I had lived in my whole life compared to this small, hot, and humid place. However, by the end of my weekend visit, as I was saying my goodbyes and heading toward security at the Brownsville airport, I looked back at the kind and friendly faces of the leaders, and I knew right then that I would be seeing them again. As I flew back to California, I reflected on the visit and realized that I already felt a pull toward the people there and a desire to join them in the exciting work they were doing. I accepted the call



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officially about a week later. I was commissioned and installed through St. Paul Lutheran Church in Harlingen, Texas, in August 2016 and deployed as the Facilitator of Missions and Discipleship with RioMAC, the Rio Grande Mission Action Council.

Accepting the call as Facilitator of Missions and Discipleship with RioMAC was much different than what I had anticipated and non-traditional in every sense. One of RioMAC's leaders later told me that upon realizing that I was Hispanic and came from a Mexican family, they did not expect me to accept the call. In my family, it is rare for young adults to move away even for college. Generally, the only other time a young woman moves away from her family is when she is getting married. I was the unusual one. I moved hours away for college and internship, then moved even further to accept RioMAC's call in Texas. There also I encountered person after person who would casually ask if I lived with family nearby, and when they heard my response, the look of disbelief never ceased to amuse me.

One thing I did not expect to feel when moving to South Texas was culture shock. I realize now that culture shock can be experienced anywhere, even within one's home country, as culture varies so much from region to region. Certain mannerisms, expressions, and names for things seemed so funny, especially some of those coming from the Latin community, which strangely differed from my own experience. Latin/Hispanic culture in South Texas was different from the Latin/Hispanic culture in the Bay Area of California where I had grown up. I was raised bilingually, whereas many of the Hispanic youth and young adults I encountered in Texas had never learned to speak Spanish. I learned that this was because their parents and grandparents had been raised to view their native tongue in a negative light. In fact, they had been discouraged from speaking Spanish in school to the point of being punished with detention or a quick slap of the ruler. I, on the other hand, was raised by a bilingual father and a mother who only spoke Spanish and sent to a bilingual elementary school. I benefited from learning to speak both "home Spanish" and "educational Spanish," and was surprised not to see that same background among those living mere miles from Mexico.

It was shocking for me to find families in the Rio Grande Valley where the mother only spoke Spanish, the older siblings were bilingual, but the youngest siblings spoke English and could hardly understand any Spanish. This left the middle siblings to act as translators between their mother and younger siblings. This lack of basic communication even within a home and family seemed unbelievable to me, yet this proved to be just one of many unique aspects of living and working by the border.

To give you a better geographic idea of the area I was called to serve, I lived in Harlingen, which is a central location of the Rio Grande Valley (RGV or Valley). From there, I would either drive 45 minutes west or east, and about 30 minutes north to get to one of the twelve LCMS churches I served through RioMAC. I was a shared resource among these twelve churches that composed Circuit 28 in the Texas District.

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These were primarily small churches, some of which shared a pastor, and one of which was led by a different visiting pastor every month of the year! This was a community where sharing resources and people was the norm.

Collaboration is one of the key strengths in the RGV. Never have I seen so many congregations, leaders, and communities willing to share ideas, finances, and resources to make Jesus known. I had witnessed competition for numbers and growth between local churches, but not here. Here were people who had put down roots and invested upwards of three decades building relationships with their neighbors. In that time, they had endured both dry seasons, as well as times of fruitfulness led by the Spirit. The local leaders had long realized that if new leaders were not raised, their congregations faced a difficult future. RioMAC was more than ready to try some innovative ideas, eager to create this collaborative ministry model and see where the Holy Spirit would lead them.

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Different ideas for learning, service, mission, and faith-forming opportunities were presented monthly at each RioMAC meeting, which were attended by pastors, lay leaders, and other community leaders. Some of these opportunities came through Kari Rogers, who represented Lutheran Social Services, or Upbring in Texas. Thanks to Kari, important community connections were made with different agencies that provided services and refuge to people that were coming across the border both legally and illegally. My first experience with one of these agencies came early on at a Humanitarian Respite Center in McAllen, Texas, run by a local Catholic church. The people receiving services through that center were given a hot meal, a clean change of clothes, a small bag of toiletries, and the chance to take a shower. Afterward, each person would have time to speak to legal professionals about their next steps, before being transported to the next location.

The Humanitarian Respite Center immediately opened my eyes to the unique local service opportunities available to the youth and families that I was working with. A few months later, just before Christmas, youth and adults from three different local congregations came together for a day of service at that center. They joyfully helped clean the outdoor tent structures that were being used to house dozens of cots, sorted and organized piles of donated clothes, and they took care of children while parents showered. This was just the first of many similar experiences that were to come in my time with RioMAC, experiences that were shared among people of different gender, age, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Another major organization was Upbring (Lutheran Social Services), a temporary shelter for unaccompanied minors, where they had access to a safe place to sleep,

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nutritious meals, access to education, recreational activities, and round-the-clock supervision. For the protection of the youth in their care, as well as their privacy, Upbring is extremely strict about the people they employ and their volunteers. To become a volunteer with Upbring, one must undergo many hours of training and background tests before one can even step a foot inside the shelter. One of the training videos gave us a clear picture of the many dangers migrant youth had encountered throughout their journey. After watching the video, we processed our emotions, realizing that these youth, and the adults in their lives, had been willing to place themselves at the risk of being exploited and possibly killed. A volunteer trainer emphasized that their decision to risk their lives spoke to their desperation to escape an even more grim reality back in their home country. That statement has stuck with me ever since. I have thought about it while driving back and forth from one end of the Valley to the other, looking out toward the border wall. I have thought about it as I have witnessed the ways people have set aside their strong political views when they physically cross paths with people who have a different legal status. It is striking to hear someone say, “It’s not a political issue for me; it’s a human issue.”

There was never a shortage of outreach opportunities in the Valley, especially those that were service-project based. Certainly, there is something to be said about service along the border. People tend to take notice when they see others physically serving and lending a hand to their neighbors, asking for nothing in return. This is especially true when the church body is seen physically serving outside of the walls of their building. Often, while completing a service project and sweating buckets from the extreme humidity, we would be approached by children in that neighborhood who were curious about what we were doing and surprisingly quick to jump in and join us.

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One family immediately comes to mind when I think about people jumping in to serve, when our intent was to bless *them* and share the Gospel with them through service. The Mata family consists of a mom and her three children, ranging in age from kindergarten to high school. One of our local congregations hosted a mission team from a church in Central Texas who had come to complete some light construction-based service projects. The Mata home was picked as a service location. The Mata family lived in a small trailer in a *Colonia* (an offshoot of a proper town, but more isolated). During that week of service, something beautiful happened. The Matas were not willing to sit and watch as this group of strangers worked on their trailer, instead they wanted to be part of the action! The mother cooked for the team, while her

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children helped to saw wood, hammer nails, clean, and paint. In the evenings, when it was time for the team to head back to the house of their host family, they would invite the Matas to join them and enjoy a BBQ dinner and some refreshing time in the pool. Strong bonds and relationships were formed during that mission week.

Since then, that particular mission team has returned to the Valley more than once and has stayed in contact with the Matas. Our local congregations continue to have a relationship with that family. The Matas have been interested and extremely active in all RioMAC's initiatives, especially those that revolve around youth and service. Whether as participants, serving behind the scenes, or stepping up as volunteer youth leaders for confirmation retreats, the Matas have been there. For so long, RioMAC had prayed for new leaders to be raised up in the community, and God was there answering those prayers faithfully!

The oldest of Mrs. Mata's children is now a young adult attending a local community college. He has expressed a desire multiple times to be a church worker, possibly a Youth Pastor or Director of Christian Education. However, his legal status in this country and the lack of his family's financial resources limit those options at this moment. Those same circumstances are echoed across the Valley. Because of those circumstances, I changed the way I structured my ministry efforts with youth. While during my internship in California it had been easier to plan things like confirmation retreats or fellowship outings without thinking much of cost, here in the Valley I had to shift my thinking.

There are so many factors that limit what young people in the Valley can and cannot do. The legal status of many youth in the Valley limits the places they can go, due to the border patrol checkpoint located about an hour north of the Valley. For example, there is a wonderful LCMS camp in Texas, but as it is beyond the checkpoint, many cannot benefit from that experience. Transportation is another factor, since often both parents are working to make ends meet and cannot take time off to drive their children to youth events, Bible studies, or even church on Sunday mornings. It was nearly impossible to make age-specific events for the youth, as older siblings often care for younger siblings. If we excluded someone from coming because they were too young, that meant their older siblings would not be allowed to attend either. That is where our push for family-wide programming stemmed from.

That means that as leaders, we needed to create new experiences for all the youth in the Valley to be a part of. This is where RioMAC's strength in collaborative ministry came into play. Local church leaders had access and connections to different organizations and resources that, when combined, could create impactful experiences for our families. We had leaders who consistently applied for various grants to reduce or eliminate the cost to participate in youth ministry programs and events. The success of these efforts was due largely to the system of collaboration that had been in place for decades prior to my arrival.

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There is more I could say about family dynamics, stereotypes, regional differences, and the interesting culture of border ministry. Although I no longer live or serve in South Texas, I am grateful for the experience and wisdom gained through failures and daily life there. I have never once doubted that the Lord guided that leap of faith for a reason. I am just glad I said, “Yes.” God was there in the Rio Grande Valley and He continues to work there, even when a leader is called away. One thing I have taken with me is a deep respect for those that have been there long before I got there and remain there long after I have gone. They are faithfully building relationships and doing the work that the Lord has empowered them to do, even when others come along with shiny new ideas, programs, and revised methods. That faithfulness is so steady and has laid the groundwork for others to water the seeds that have already been planted.

There is one pastor in particular that comes to mind as I reflect on some of those long-lasting relationships. This pastor has been a fixture in the Mercedes, Texas, community for decades now. I was introduced to so many Mercedes residents when I first moved to the area, and I recall being so impressed that this pastor had invested so much time into building relationships with people in his community, many of whom did not even attend the church! From local mechanics to the cashier at the local Dairy Queen, Pastor Weber knew them and their families personally. When outside mission teams began their search for a local place to serve, we knew to point them to Pastor Weber. It is that kind of day-to-day steady faithfulness that has laid the foundation for other leaders who have come and gone over the years. It is thanks to servant leaders such as this that RioMAC’s initiative in South Texas has been a place for new leaders to be fruitful.

My prayer is that faithful servant leaders do not grow weary in doing good and continuing to share the Gospel, even when they feel as though no good is coming out of their work. There is good there; it is there because the Lord is doing good through them, and His faithfulness never fails.

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