

## **Merry Christmas and Happy New Year 2017!**

*“Glory to God in the Highest, and peace on earth to those on whom His favor rests!” (Luke 2:14)* was the message of the angels to the shepherds in Bethlehem. It appears, however, that between this angelical message, and actual peace on earth, there are many superimposed grey clouds of late.

Our magical Rio Grande Valley and the Mexico-Texas border sits front row to harrowing scenes of shattered lives this year. The year has encompassed countless political and humanitarian challenges. The majority of these are against hundreds of innocent children, whose lives have been interrupted and devastated in the worst of ways. So much so, that we have witnessed the breaking of even the most hardened of hearts in the wake of the atrocities of sexual abuse, violence, and human trafficking. You cannot bear witness to such events and remain unmoved. Amidst the hunger, the tears and fears that are so prevalent in these innocent lives as they journey to freedom, the rise in abuses are alarming and have shaken us to the core. Minors are the most vulnerable. The highest number of those affected are Mexicans and Central Americans at their points of origin, and on through the nightmare journey of traversing north.

We, the staff and volunteers of the Southwest Good Samaritan Project, stand firmly in our belief that our calling begins with allowing our hearts to break with the things that break the heart of God. In so doing, we are receptive and obedient to, that which—quite frankly—has broken us greatly this year. The Bible tells us that as Christians, end times would see us with much strife and division; coldness in humanity, and a turning a blind eye. We do not purport to understand God’s timing or His mysteries, but we fear we’ve seen much of what the Word so clearly declares.

I’d like to share with you the sad and painful story of \*David. He is a recent refugee arrival from Cuba. His particular case and story bear strikingly similarities to the thousands of Cuban refugees who, over the past few years, have defected from Cuba via Ecuador as a gateway passage. The geographical deviation so far into South America augments the severity and difficulty of the journey northward to the United States.

He escaped on August 22, 2015. This was only the beginning of what would become a chilling and torturous undertaking. Upon arrival to Ecuador, he attempted to cross into Colombia on November 4th. He is arrested and robbed of his life savings, \$7,000 USD, carefully saved through duress, hardship and sacrifice in Cuba over a period of years. He is returned to Ecuador. Upon stating his case to Ecuadorian authorities, he requests political asylum. He is denied. On February 16th of this year, he once again attempts to enter Colombia in hopes that they might grant him the political asylum that Ecuador would not. He is kidnapped and sequestered in Medellín. He is added to a group of approximately 10 fellow Cubans, also held captive and for ransom. The struggle to pay the extortion begins. He has no money and begs to call the few people he knows in the United States. An entire host of scattered friends and family scramble to gather the \$3,000 the kidnappers demand. He is one of the fortunate few in the group. He is able to secure and pay his ransom. In the interim, he and fellow kidnaped Cubans are brutally beaten, and are witness to the killing of one member, who having no friends or family outside of Cuba, is unable to pay his ransom.

Upon his release, David is left to his own devices. No money, no food, no shelter. He and other released Cubans make their way through a Colombian jungle, guiding themselves as best they

could, to reach any town or populated area. Thus far the kidnapped group attempts to remain together, all having the same goal of coming to the United States. They spend five days in that jungle, a female doctor among them, who had a broken leg as a result of the beatings from the kidnapers, is dropped off in a small shantytown to be taken to a hospital. They'd been carrying her through the jungle the entire time, and had to get her the most immediate help possible. David does not know what became of her, they never saw her again.

The group, on Day 5, has finally made their way to a port town and they are directed to illegal traffickers by the locals. The group is able to board a speedboat belonging to human traffickers en route to Panama. Their horror continues at sea. The speedboat carries them, and an additional number of Cubans, totaling approximately 20. One of the group is a young lady with a three year old daughter. The sea is rough, and the child is whipped from her mother's arms and tossed overboard by strong waves. The traffickers make no effort to stop and save her. The boat speeds on. The mother of the child is inconsolable. The entire group is powerless. As the Panamanian shore loomed close, the boat begins to take on considerable water. The number of people aboard and its weight are too much against the raging sea. The boat begins to sink. The head trafficker, enraged, pulls out a gun and kills his two assistants in anger at the impending loss of the boat. The last words his assistants hear are shouts from the captain in accusation of ineptitude. The group, already suffering the trauma of disregard for the child who had been whipped overboard, jump out of the boat, and swim their way to shore. They are certain the captain will begin shooting at them next. All 20, thankfully, do make it to shore.

Upon arrival at Panamanian dry land, and through a miracle network of local goodwill, they are able to secure lodging for the night. They are exhausted. They are hungry. Tragedy, however, was about to strike again. The mother of the young child drowned at sea, in great despair, takes her own life. She is found hanging by a member of the group. In a suicide note found beside her, she asks the group's forgiveness, and speaks of the impotence she felt at not being able to protect her daughter from a life under communism in Cuba, or her inability to save her from the ocean's wrath and human traffickers. David and the group, understandably, reel in anguish from the shock, the trauma, and the pain of all they've encountered so far.

A day later the group continues the arduous journey north. The locals direct them to Protestant and Catholic churches, where they are fed and given clothing. They are advised on the routes they must take to help them reach Costa Rica and its border crossing. The Panamanian churches, as is so often the case in Latin America, are the ones to provide support. Meager funds that set the group aboard public buses, and packed lunches for sustenance are the welcome respite in a journey that has so far been filled with horror. They would see much of this same grace from those who had the least to give. They made their way into Costa Rica, then onto Nicaragua. In Nicaragua the story once again takes a dark turn, as the authorities rob them of their few belongings and little money. The group was able to reach the Honduras border through the mercy of kind truck drivers, who took only a small fee for allowing them to ride in the back of their trucks to the furthest destination they could reach.

Honduras was yet another odyssey of hunger and fear. Once again the kindness of humble locals, the monetary aid from small Catholic parishes saw them into the night, and ultimately, into Guatemala. In Guatemala they experienced the most kindness, and were able to have warm meals and night's rest in churches. That reprieve, however, would only last until their arrival into Mexico. The group was captured and arrested by Mexican police at a Guatemala-Mexico river crossing. At this point in the journey the group is forced to disperse. Bribes are paid

to advance their release, but some were freed sooner than others, and they are no longer able to continue on together. The majority of the group has made it onto US soil, and I am happy to report that, finally, on Nov. 7, 2016, more than a year from his defection from Cuba, David arrived to Reynosa, Tamaulipas. At the border crossing in Hidalgo, TX, he turned himself into immigration customs agents, and requests political asylum. As with all the refugees that the Southwest Good Samaritan Project receives, David first was processed through Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), in Hidalgo, TX, before being handed over to us. It was an honor to welcome him. It is with immense joy that we report he is currently living with a relative in McAllen, TX, and will start 2017 with legal authorization to work so that he may embark upon a new chapter of his life. We hold him in our prayers, and ask that you lift him and all the others, in yours.

I thank all of you for reading thus far. As you can see, there is much work to be done. The refugees that come through the Southwest Good Samaritan Project see us as a salve after all they they have been through to arrive at freedom. We are honored to be that balm. We are honored to rise to the challenge of our call to welcome the stranger, to help the hurting. It is my heart's desire that you know, that much like the salve that we are to our refugees, you, dear Church, are a salve to us. Your grace, your prayers, and your support in times of crisis this year has been the balm that has seen us through. It is in Bayview, TX that, like Samuel the prophet, we raise our Ebenezer: our thanks to God, hither by who's grace we come.

Our effort remains the same as in years past. We provide all manner of shelter, food, clothing and toiletries; legal advisement and spiritual nourishment. In the spirit of ecumenical brotherhood, we support several Catholic and independent Pentecostal shelters and outreaches that do work similar to ours. The need is great, the hurting are many. Our scope and our reach go beyond the foreigner desperate for freedom, it also extends to the local community, and our orphanage, Casa Betél, right across the border in Matamoros, Tamaulipas. We currently have 41 children, ages 6-18, in residence. In addition to our Mexican orphanage, we continue to support the Rev. Abel Cardona, and the ministry that feeds the local families in Matamoros that live in the surrounding area of the city's landfill. 250 people are fed daily, in great part due to the extraordinary help and donation of the Disciples Rice and Disciples Beans programs. We were the recipient of 45,000 pounds of rice, and 15,000 pounds of beans this year, and we are most grateful for the blessing of full bellies that this provided.

Further, once again the children of both the Mexico and Texas sides of our ministry will have a wonderful Christmas thanks to Mike's Kids. Under the faithful leadership of Mark Sleight, Vice-Chairman of the SWGSP, and also director and organizer of his late father's beautiful legacy, Mike's Kids. Mark, in conjunction with the North Texas Area of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) continue to spearhead the effort to ensure that all children, in particular the marginalized, the transient, and the local, have an abundance of joy on Christmas morning. His heart and dedication to honoring the memory of his father, Mike Sleight, is evident in the smiles and innocent gratitude of the hundreds of lives he reaches.

As we remain faithful, we are thankful that you, in your commitment to join us, have as well. It has been a year of extraordinary financial crises. We cannot conclude without special recognition of University Christian Church of Austin, TX, whose gift and unwavering support saw us through much of this year. Incessant thank yous also to the former Central Christian Church

of Corpus Christi, TX, who allowed us to be beneficiaries of a gift we never imagined. Out of the sadness of that closing, came a great lesson in being not only our brother's keeper, but in being literal stewards of hope, and we thank them.

May the God of all grace that has brought us through 2016, bring us into 2017. May we always be reminded that on the other side of obedience to our calling lies great mercy. May we all together continue to be agents of grace, no matter the challenge. Thank you, dear brothers and sisters in Christ. We continue on. Come see us! Our doors, exactly like our hearts, are always open.

Peace be unto you.

The Rev. F. Feliberto Pereira  
Founder & Director, Southwest Good Samaritan Ministries