

Courts & Ports

Faithful Witness on the Texas-Mexico Border



The Texas Interfaith Center for Public Policy/Texas Impact invites you to participate in **Courts & Ports: Faithful Witness on the Texas-Mexico Border.**

This 2-day immersion experience engages people of faith to witness first-hand the legal and law enforcement processes related to immigration, detention, and deportation occurring in South Texas.

Courts & Ports is a partnership between the Interfaith Center and the American Civil Liberties Union of Texas. Participants will observe proceedings in federal criminal court, and record their observations for use by ACLU and other attorneys.

Participants also will meet with faith and policy experts working on the border, and spend time with individuals who have pending asylum cases. Participants will engage in contextualizing discussion with Texas Impact pastoral staff and other faith leaders; plan and participate in worship; and become part of an online “alumni” community.



Courts & Ports is made possible by the generous financial support of Presbyterian Disaster Assistance, Mission Presbytery, United Methodist Women, the United Methodist General Commission on Religion and Race, the North Texas Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church, the ACLU of Texas, and individual and congregational members of Texas Impact.

The Need

With the advent of the Administration's "zero-tolerance" policy, federal criminal courts on the southern border of the U.S. are overwhelmed with cases involving citizens of other countries crossing the border from Mexico into the U.S. in a location other than an official port of entry. This unauthorized entry constitutes a misdemeanor offense similar to trespass. Many of the individuals who come across the border in this fashion plan to make an asylum claim, and in the past, border law enforcement often have not pressed charges related to the misdemeanor offense since the defendant ultimately will end up in immigration court. Under zero-tolerance however, all such misdemeanors must be prosecuted in criminal court, where all U.S. due process requirements apply.

Attorneys practicing in the federal criminal courts in Texas stress that court observers are needed to identify and document due process weaknesses and violations. The presence of observers in the court may strengthen an asylum seeker's resolve to plead not guilty, and may empower a judge to request modifications in process. Additionally, Immigration and Customs Enforcement has been reported blocking legal ports of entry, intimidating asylum seekers and forcing them to cross illegally. All observers of the situation believe the need for court observers will continue at least through the next year.

Expectations

Participants in the "Courts and Ports" program will:

1. Observe first-hand the operation of the U.S. immigration system and current policies related to border security
2. Interact directly with individuals who are seeking asylum in the U.S.
3. Participate in theological and policy discussions with grassroots and faith leaders
4. Practice storytelling and communication with skilled trainers so they can share their experiences effectively with their home communities
5. Become part of a facilitated online "Courts and Ports Alumni" community that will work to change the nature of the immigration debate in local congregations and neighborhoods

This project builds on work the Interfaith Center has been doing for years with faith communities across the state in building bridges between direct action and policy advocacy. Bearing witness to the current situation on the border will equip people of faith from across Texas for potent advocacy for just immigration policies. Moreover, the stories of Texans from local communities across the state participating in the project will help to keep the border crisis in the news cycle in every media market, including on local television news. The project will provide substantive legal benefit: Attorneys working on asylum cases say that the presence of court monitors has led to substantive changes in legal outcomes, such as

defendants changing their pleas, as well as improving the morale of immigration judges. Media and faith-based partners on the border are reporting incidents of border agents blocking the ports of entry so asylum seekers cannot enter lawfully, but yielding to American citizens accompanying asylum seekers across the border.

Basics

1. The program is designed for groups of no more than eight, and no fewer than two. Participants generally will observe court proceedings in teams of two.
2. Participants can all be from the same congregation, or Texas Impact can match up participants from multiple congregations up to a maximum of eight.
3. Participants are responsible for their own travel costs.
4. Each trip will last two full days. Participants will arrive the night before the first day, and leave either the night of the second day, or the following morning.
5. The program is only open to individuals 18 years of age and up.
6. All participants must have a valid government-issued form of identification such as a driver's license or passport. To participate in bridge crossings, participants must have a valid U.S. passport.
7. All participants will be required to sign a covenant agreement stating that they understand the program rules, and that they will bear witness in their home community to their experiences in the program.

Sample Schedule

Sunday	6:30PM	Arrive and check in
Monday	8:00AM	Briefing with ACLU staff
	10:00AM	Court observation
	12:00PM	Lunch
	2:00PM	Briefing with Proyecto Azteca staff
	4:00PM	Debrief and group discussion
	6:00PM	Dinner
Tuesday	9:00AM	Fellowship at La Posada shelter
	12:00PM	Lunch
	2:00PM	Bridge observation
	5:00PM	Debrief and dinner
	7:00PM	Worship

Note: Schedules are designed to be as responsive as possible to the rapidly changing policy environment. Participants are expected to remain flexible in the face of opportunities or challenges outside the Interfaith Center's control.

Register or find out more

To register yourself or your group to participate in a Courts & Ports trip, email erica@texasimpact.org (*Registration website coming soon!*)

To schedule a presentation about Courts & Ports for your group, email scott@texasimpact.org

To find out more about the Texas Interfaith Center/Texas Impact, visit texasimpact.org



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