

What does solidarity mean at the border?

It's not about electoral politics—not when both major parties embrace the policies that are oppressing people.

by [Dorothee Benz](#) in the [November 2024](#) issue

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(Photo: grandriver / iStock / Getty)

In a makeshift camp along the border wall in Arizona, humanitarian aid volunteers greet weary travelers as they wander in. They point to the milk crates full of granola bars and canned Vienna sausages and gesture, *Take, eat, it's free*. There are some tents scattered around, and small fires around which people wrapped in blankets huddle on this cold January day.

Two volunteers, L and M, are making ramen in enormous pots on an old two-burner Coleman stove. A line of people waits, paper bowls and plastic spoons in hand. The water comes to a boil in the first pot, and one of the women dumps in 20 or 30 packets of ramen. Once it's ready, the volunteers serve those in line while the other pot comes to a boil.

At some point, another volunteer comes over, taps L on the shoulder, and says she is needed in the first-aid area. L, a trained wilderness first responder, steps away. I take her place. A while later, M is also called away for another urgent task. I manage the two pots of ramen and the endless line of hungry people by myself until G comes up and says she needs me to join her to "drive the wall."

"Sure," I respond quickly. "I just need someone to take over the ramen."

"There's no one," she says. "P and M had to take the other truck to do a medical evacuation. It'll have to be self-serve, like it was the other night."

People cross the border in this part of the Sonoran Desert through holes or gaps in the border wall and start walking west toward the Customs and Border Patrol station in Sasabe. But the station is 17 miles away, and there is no water, no food, and no shelter along the dusty dirt road. The able-bodied make it to the makeshift camp that No More Deaths and Samaritans volunteers have cobbled together, but the ill and injured, the elderly, and those with infants or young children often cannot.

"Driving the wall" means bringing food and water to those stranded along the way.

The details differ from day to day and place to place, but there are people like the ones I encountered in Arizona crossing the US-Mexico border every day, making a dangerous journey and facing immense hardship. The obstacles they face in reaching and crossing the border will be largely unaffected by the presidential election in November—because the laws and policies that have created those obstacles are embraced by both parties and both presidential candidates.

For those on the border, this year's US elections may be as irrelevant as the outcome of the Super Bowl.

This particular January day was one of several I spent along the wall during a month of volunteer work with No More Deaths. The humanitarian aid group in southern Arizona works to end death and suffering in the borderlands through civil initiative; it is, as its website puts it, "people of conscience working openly and in community to

uphold fundamental human rights.”

The group’s core work is the direct provision of humanitarian aid, carried out entirely by volunteers. While the volunteers come from a wide variety of faith and spiritual backgrounds or none at all, No More Death’s roots are in faith-based principles in defense of human life and dignity, and it is an official ministry of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Tucson.

I asked one of the long-term local volunteers whether they could discern a difference between the Trump years and the Biden years out here in the desert. “Not at all,” they responded.

As I write, in the summer of 2024, liberal and leftist friends all around me are sounding the alarm at the possibility of a second Trump presidency. In the choice between business as usual and the drive off the cliff into full-throated authoritarianism, I have no doubt that the former is far preferable. At the same time, I have to grapple with the reality of how things look from the borderland, where there is no meaningful difference between the Democrats’ and the Republicans’ border policy for those seeking to immigrate to the United States.

There is, to be sure, a difference in *rhetoric* between Democrats and Republicans. Trump routinely dehumanizes immigrants as “vermin” that are “infesting” the US and calls them criminals, while Harris—and before her, Biden—sticks to “a nation of immigrants” slogans alongside the softer language of “border security.” Rhetorical differences can mask policy similarities, as they do in this case, but it is also true that narratives have material consequences: they help shape the political terrain in which policy is decided. Hateful rhetoric also contributes to violence against vulnerable populations.

Trump has also threatened “mass deportation” on a new scale, while a Harris administration would continue the present pattern of deporting several hundred thousand people each year (a rate that should qualify for the characterization of “mass deportation” as well). The Biden administration has implemented a few positive reforms, such as relief from deportation for some people married to US citizens. In terms of the border itself, the GOP platform and the Trump campaign also propose further militarization and additional detention centers for anyone apprehended crossing the border.

These differences notwithstanding, the Biden administration has continued or resurrected the most consequential border policies of the Trump administration—most notably the asylum ban, which summarily deports most people apprehended crossing the border without the opportunity to file an asylum claim, and the requirement that asylees use the problematic CBP One app to qualify for what entry there is.

The current militarization of the border began in 1994 with Prevention through Deterrence, a federal policy designed to force crossing migrants into the most remote and dangerous areas along the border. The theory is that people will choose to return to the dangers they are fleeing rather than face the dangers of crossing. “Illegal entrants crossing through remote, uninhabited expanses of land and sea along the border can find themselves in mortal danger,” the policy says.

In other words, it is literally the policy of the United States to funnel people toward mortal danger in order to enter the country. The predictable result has been that deterrence has not happened, but great suffering and death have. Hundreds of people die each year on this journey; thousands have gone missing and have never been recovered. The cartels are strengthened because fewer people dare attempt a crossing without a guide, and the cartels run the guide business. And everyone who does make it suffers in the inhospitable desert environment.

Driving the wall with G, we saw a group of people cross through a hole in the wall just as our truck approached. We stopped to offer them food and water, and I noticed one family, tightly holding hands, eyes wide in terror. There were elders and many children, ranging from toddlers to preteens. As we were talking, three CBP vehicles pulled up.

Contrary to what most people in the US think, many people crossing the border are looking for Border Patrol rather than trying to evade it. In this region where we had set up the makeshift camp, everyone was looking to get to the Sasabe station to initiate an asylum application.

G and I watched with trepidation as 34 people filed into CBP’s paddy wagons. As humanitarian aid workers, it’s not our role to encourage or dissuade people from seeking out Border Patrol. Our job is to offer life-saving aid to those who need it: water, food, medical care, and, to the extent possible, shelter or at least firewood and blankets.

Once people are in CBP custody, their fate depends both on the whims of individual CBP units and officers and on US policy. Scattered reports confirm what NMD volunteers and others have heard: that sometimes asylum seekers are pressured into signing “voluntary deportation” orders. How many of the people we saw along the border wall were actually able to initiate their asylum claims none of us knows. The last thing G said to each of the people as they walked toward the CBP wagons that night was, “No firmes.” Don’t sign anything.

Why are people who want to make an asylum application ducking through a hole in the wall instead of coming through an official port of entry?

At that particular moment, ports of entry in the region had been closed. But even when they are open, CBP denies entry to anyone without an appointment made on the CBP One app, and it randomly grants a limited number of appointments each day. That is to say, the official way to seek asylum requires a smartphone, internet access, the language and technological literacy to navigate a government app, and an indefinite wait (generally several months) under dangerous conditions in Mexico (the app is geofenced so that a person has to be north of Mexico City to use it) in what is functionally a lottery system.

Several immigrant organizations are currently suing the US government, claiming that this system denies people the fundamental right to seek asylum.

Thus people unable to jump through these CBP hoops cross between ports of entry and seek to apply for asylum with local Border Patrol agents. But now, under the resurrected asylum ban, migrants like the group of 34 whom G and I encountered will be summarily denied their right (under both US and international law) to seek asylum and be deported without due process of any kind. (In case you’re wondering, other types of legal entry are also nonexistent in any meaningful way. The wait times for family immigration run in the decades, and employment-based immigration is a tiny sliver, as is the arduous refugee process.)

The range of mainstream political debate about border policy does not include any reforms that would alter these conditions. The militarization of the border is firmly entrenched. The CBP One app, launched during the Trump years, has been embraced by the Biden-Harris administration. And the asylum ban—once considered an extreme policy proving Trump’s hostility to immigrants—is now owned by the Democrats.

Meanwhile, death and suffering continue unabated at the border. For those whose conscience demands that they do something rather than nothing, the question is, what? Particularly for those of us in the US who stand in the tradition of liberationist theologies, it will not do to set our sights on long-term political transformation alone while people are ground under the wheels of an oppressive machine run by our own government.

It was precisely this question and this imperative that led me to apply for No More Death's desert aid volunteer program. As a "legal permanent resident" (green card holder) who came to the US when I was two, I have always been aware of the fundamental arbitrariness that marks some people as legal and others as illegal.

After Trump was elected in 2016, I became active in the New Sanctuary Coalition in New York City. I was at JFK International Airport the day the so-called Muslim ban went into effect. I was arrested in the protest that prevented Ravi Ragbir's deportation, and I spent many hours strategizing with comrades about how we could pressure NYC to live into its nominal status as a sanctuary city in a meaningful way.

For a while, we drove a wedge between ICE and the NYPD, but by 2020 ICE was allowed back into sensitive sites like hospitals and the police were assisting with ICE arrests again. The futility of trying to mitigate the horror of immigration policy in my own city, let alone having any impact nationally, filled me with despair.

I was first accepted into No More Deaths' desert aid volunteer program in 2020, but then the COVID pandemic happened. It wasn't until January 2024 that I was finally able to strap four gallons of water onto my back and carry them into the Sonoran Desert to leave in a place where people crossing would find them.

NMD volunteers provide aid in the desert in several ways. One is carrying water, food, socks, and blankets into remote areas—the vast expanse of desert wilderness that US policy pushes people into—and leaving them there. It's hard to know the exact impact these supplies have, or how many lives they may have helped save. But when we arrive at a drop site we typically find empty water jugs, so we know the water is being used.

No More Deaths also runs two humanitarian aid camps (one in conjunction with the Samaritans) deep in the desert. Water, food, clothes, medical supplies, and shelter are there for those in need. Volunteers keep the place stocked and cleaned. While I was there, I spent several days in camp, cleaning and maintaining the composting

toilets, helping clean the kitchen, and hauling out bags of trash.

Whether it was work in camp, doing water drops, or offering aid along the wall, doing humanitarian aid work was a bulwark against despair. The concreteness of being able to provide one tiny but undeniably real piece of relief to those in mortal danger was compelling. I was frequently reminded of this quote from writer Grace Paley: “The only recognizable feature of hope is action.”

I knew nothing about the people I helped in these small ways—where they came from, where they were going, why they made the journey. Indeed, I never met most of them—the people who would drink the water I had carried into the mountains or wear the socks I left there; the people who sat on a toilet I had cleaned, perhaps the first clean toilet they had seen in weeks. Along the wall, we encountered people who spoke Spanish, French, Arabic, Hindi, Punjabi—none of which I speak. But I could stick out my hand with a bottle of water or a granola bar and speak the language of human need.

In Mark 3, Jesus encounters a man with a withered hand and heals him. The man’s disability likely prevented him from working and consigned him to destitution. Jesus responds by healing him—without asking any questions or making any judgments.

“Throughout his ministry, Jesus treated the people and their needs as holy,” says Obery M. Hendricks Jr. in *The Politics of Jesus*. On the border I came to understand humanitarian aid in the same way. It didn’t matter who the people we encountered were, where they were from, why they were there. Were they thirsty? We gave them water. Were they hungry? We gave them food. Were they cold? We gave them blankets and firewood. The sole criterion is human need. Our job is to treat the people’s needs as holy.

But there is more to the story, too. Jesus also had an analysis about the needs he saw and met in his ministry. Hendricks says Jesus told people that “the present order sinned against the justice of God *because it sinned against their [the people’s] well-being*” (emphasis added). The story of the withered hand fits this analysis. Jesus heals the man on the sabbath, in violation of the sabbath law, as some Pharisees watch “so that they might accuse him.” Local leaders are weaponizing the law in order to sabotage Jesus’ ministry, in order to keep the people’s needs from being met.

The parallels to the situation on the US border are hard to resist. US policy is designed to harm the well-being of asylum seekers and migrants by exposing them to life-threatening conditions. CBP personnel have been documented deliberately destroying water caches in the desert. Political elites vie for the claim to be the toughest on “border security.” Through all of this, our job, as followers of Jesus, is to treat the people’s needs as holy.

This beautiful image from Hendricks is linked to a liberation theology interpretation of the gospels, a lens through which the essential meaning of the gospel is clear: God desires deliverance for the oppressed not in some far-off afterlife but in the here and now. This liberation tradition—which I count myself in—insists that our core work as disciples is to contest and disrupt systems of oppression.

The struggle for political transformation is a clear part of the call to contest and disrupt systems of oppression, and it has been my life’s work. As noted earlier, it was the futility of political change in this historical moment that led me to humanitarian aid work. That work, in turn, has further shifted my understanding of what I can and should do in the world in response to the human need of migrants. In particular, it made real to me the imperative of solidarity and gave me a deeper understanding of what solidarity must entail. In the story of the man with the withered hand, the key takeaway is that Jesus sizes up the threat from elites and heals the man anyway, in full knowledge that it is both against the law and potentially dangerous for him personally.

Solidarity means standing with the oppressed in their human need and helping meet it in whatever ways we can, regardless of whether that help is legal. But it also means recognizing the oppressive systems that create that need for what they are—immoral and illegitimate—and reinterpreting the world from that point of view.

From my point of view as a White, middle-class person of privileged immigration and education status, both the government and the social order function tolerably well. I can afford food and housing; I have access to health care and government services if and when I need them. I could call the police and be reasonably certain that I would be neither arrested nor shot when they arrived.

To be in solidarity with the migrants and asylum seekers in the Sonoran Desert means recognizing that none of these things is true for them—and then rethinking not just political perspectives but also priorities accordingly. And actions.

During a second trip to the border this summer, I stayed at a place that had a know-your-rights poster on the inside of the apartment door in case the police showed up. It contained standard information: keep the door closed and ask for any warrant to be slid under the door, make sure it's valid, refuse to say anything, assert the right to an attorney, and so on.

The poster's unstated perspective inverts the "law and order" narrative in which we are all immersed; it understands law enforcement presence in such a scenario as persecutory. But it was the last line on the poster that caught my eye and has stayed with me: "Solidarity means silence to law enforcement." Solidarity requires me to abandon the assumptions that come with my social location and then to act from the perspective of the oppressed.

In *God of the Oppressed*, James Cone talks about this kind of shift as a conversion experience, a radical reorientation grounded in repentance and in "the gift of faith to struggle with and for the freedom of the oppressed." Paulo Freire, in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, also uses the language of conversion, though the text is not a theological one; he goes further, embracing the image of rebirth and giving Christians a new way to understand that central idea. "Solidarity requires that one enter into the situation of those with whom one is solidary," he writes. "It is a radical posture. . . . Conversion to the people requires a profound rebirth."

And so I end where I began, with the observation that for those on our border seeking safe harbor or economic survival, the coming election offers no reprieve. Their continued subjugation under US law and policy are assured. The question remains, What do people of conscience do in response? For me a conversion to the people means that I am looking to the abolitionists, the transformative justice activists, the community fridge organizers, and the mutual aid networks for my political analysis, rather than to pundits and politicians, and trying to match my actions in the world accordingly.