



Kino Border Initiative: Partnership in Ministry to and with Migrants

Kenneth Gavin, SJ

Director, Jesuit Refugee Service/USA

In mid-January 2009 the Kino Border Initiative (KBI), a ministry to migrants along the Mexico-Arizona border, was inaugurated by six partners that included men and women religious, two Jesuit-sponsored migration and refugee organizations, and two dioceses serving the Ambos Nogales communities within an hour's drive of Tucson. The start of this new ministry was the culmination of a three-year process of reflection, discernment and conversation about the reality of migration, the most urgent needs of migrants, and the Church's response to those needs.

In addition to highlighting this new initiative in the area of migrant ministry, this report will focus on the realization that partnership will be the mainstay of this new venture. It will also address lessons learned in developing this new ministry.

The six core partners of the KBI are the Archdiocese of Hermosillo, the Diocese of Tucson, the Jesuit Provinces of California and Mexico, the Misioneras de la Eucaristía (a religious community of sisters based in Colima, Mexico) and the Jesuit Refugee Service/USA. Each partner group played a significant role in the development of the KBI. While the core KBI staff consists of four religious priests from the Jesuit provinces of California, Mexico and New Orleans, and three religious sisters of the Misioneras de la Eucaristía, the specific mission and needs of each of the six partners has been incorporated in the overall development of this ministerial project.



Bishop Gerald Kicanas, of the Diocese of Tucson, delivering homily during the Mass of Inauguration for the Kino Border Initiative at Sacred Heart Church in Nogales, Arizona, January 2009.

In reflecting on the formation of the KBI, Fr. Sean Carroll, SJ, the Executive Director of the KBI, has often highlighted the leadership of the Mexican and U.S. Bishops who, in their 2003 letter, "Strangers No Longer," urged a serious, just, loving and humane approach to the issue of migration. Again and again the bishops have stressed the importance of partnerships across borders that recognize that the reality of immigration and migration is both a bi-national and global.

From the start it was clear that the Diocese of Hermosillo had had a long history of pastoral care for migrants in their staffing of migrant shelters in both Altar and Agua Prieta. Given the recent increase in the north-south flow of migrants deported from the States, Archbishop José Ulises Macías Salcedo of Hermosillo

made his support clear for the KBI project in Nogales, Sonora. He saw it as a help to the local community's response to the needs of deported Mexicans. His counterpart in Tucson, Bishop Gerald Kicanas, also welcomed the KBI to his diocese, recognizing the KBI is an important step in responding not only to those deported from the U.S., but to the larger need for comprehensive immigration reform in our country.

The Misioneras de la Eucaristía, had solid experience in sponsoring shelters for migrants in Mexico. In addition, they have collaborated with Borderlinks, an NGO working on the border, to welcome delegations from the U.S. interested in border issues. As KBI partners, the Misioneras have brought a practical knowledge of migration, a Gospel commitment to migrants and a compassionate dedication to serve humbly God's poor.



Sr. Imelda, right, of the Missionary Sisters of the Eucharist talks with a woman and her son in the Women's Shelter run by the Kino Border Initiative.

Jesuit Refugee Service/USA had also recognized a need for a ministry like the KBI while working as chaplains for detainees in federal detention centers throughout the United States over the past ten years. For them the KBI was a logical extension of the accompaniment provided by their chaplains in detention centers to the border crossing of Nogales.

Fr. John McGarry, SJ, the Provincial of the California Province of the Jesuits, commented on the importance of this collaborative partnership at the inauguration of the KBI this past January: "One of the most gratifying things about this effort is that it is a partnership amongst so many committed groups. This kind of apostolic partnership and sponsorship is a model for future ministry in the church and we make it a reality today in this initiative." The Jesuit provinces and organizations involved in the KBI recognized early on in the exploratory process that, while they had much to offer in terms of resources, spirituality, and educational experience, they also had much to receive from the reality of communities living on both sides of the Mexican border. Together they would learn how to best respond

to the call of Christ present among those who are suffering from the consequences of contemporary immigration policy, border enforcement efforts, and the reality of undocumented migration, apprehension, detention and deportation.



Sr. Engracia Robles of the Missionary Sisters of the Eucharist, right, receives a donation of bread for the CAMDEP run by the Kino Border Initiative.

From its start this binational, community-based migration ministry has had three areas of focus: humanitarian assistance to migrants, public and diocesan education, and research and advocacy on migration issues. The KBI's clear humanitarian concern is seen in its center for deported migrants (Centro de Asistencia para Migrantes Deportados) and its shelter for unaccompanied migrant women and their children (Casa Nazaret). The small center, already close to bursting its seams, regularly serves two meals a day to an average of 200 deported migrants, distributes donated clothing, offers limited medical assistance, helps migrants to know their rights as Mexican citizens, and provides needy migrants with compassionate pastoral accompaniment. Since the KBI's inauguration, Casa Nazaret, the shelter for women, has hosted more than 100 women and children, providing them with a safe place to bathe, rest and recover from their long journeys. Much of the food and volunteer support for both the center and the shelter comes from local parishioners and businesses in Nogales, Sonora.

On the educational front, the KBI has begun to sponsor bi-weekly meetings with parish leaders as well as monthly liturgies in the parishes of Nogales, Sonora, to highlight the needs of migrants who are returning home. On the U.S. side of the border, KBI staff

members continue to meet with parish pastoral councils along the border to help parishioners discuss migration in a safe and friendly setting the conflictive issues surrounding. The Executive Director has already been approached by a number of high schools and universities who are interested in sending delegations of students to the KBI to learn about the experience of migrants along the southern border of our country.

In addition to advocacy efforts with many local non-governmental organizations along the Arizona-Mexico border, the KBI has begun an advocacy project with the Jesuit Migration Service-Mexico and Jesuit Refugee Service/USA to document human rights abuses experienced by migrants. The result of this work will support advocacy efforts to improve federal procedures for detention and deportation in both the U.S. and Mexico.



Fr. Sean Carroll, SJ, director of the Kino Border Initiative talks with Sr. Engracia Robles of the Missionary Sisters of the Eucharist, inside CAMDEP.

What have we learned in our reflections and deliberations in beginning the Kino Border Initiative? A great deal:

1. A binational approach is required for ministering to migrants and in advocating for changes in immigration and deportation regulations on both sides of the border.
2. The Church's presence extends beyond borders. The presence of our faith community on both sides of the border invites us to see ourselves not as strangers but as brothers and sisters in the Lord.
3. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The collaborative effort to establish the KBI among six religious partners has created a ministry that is strengthened by the interaction and support of all its members.
4. In long discussions about the possibility of establishing a ministry to migrants along the border, we have learned that the KBI must recognize and build on

significant pastoral presence that throughout the years the Mexican Church has shown to migrants.

5. Our Mexican partners have also taught us that the KBI must ultimately be sustained and managed by the local communities of Nogales, Arizona, and Nogales, Mexico. It should depend on these communities for both human and financial resources.
6. The KBI has been established as an independent not-for-profit and not as a specific ministry dependent solely on any of six partners. From the trust created by working together over three years, the partners have learned to let go of “ownership” issues and contribute their unique talents to a joint ministry that serves the most vulnerable of God’s people in the U.S. and Mexico.

The Kino Border Initiative is still an infant ministry. It will face struggles and difficulties as it tries to reach out to find Christ in the poorest among us. But it moves forward in hope. Perhaps Fr. Vili Valderrama, whose parish of St. Felipe de Jesús Parish in Nogales, Arizona, is deeply involved with KBI, describes well this hope that many of us experience in this partnered ministry: “I feel that the Kino Border Initiative is going to be a turning point in the life and ministry of this region and that the Kino Border Initiative is going to be a unifying force.”

[For further information about the Kino Border Initiative, contact Fr. Sean Carroll, SJ, Executive Director, at (520) 287-2370 or at scarroll@calprov.org.]