A group of fifteen students and three leaders from Eastern Mennonite University in Virginia were hosted for one week by Frontera de Cristo, as we began a semester long course of study. Previously some in our group have had frequent interactions with immigrants in their community and were eager to come to the border, others said they knew almost nothing about the border area and the complex issues related to immigration.

One of the aspects of our week which we appreciated was that repeatedly – in a wide variety of ways – the experience connected with biblical faith. We read passages from the book of Mark each day; one biblical reflection took place early in the morning at Café Justo and another along the border wall. Our visit with CRREDA, which provides recovery from drug addiction, clearly revealed their spiritual basis, while other interactions with migrants took place in faith-based organizations. Sunday we took part in worship services at the Lirio de los Valles church in A.P.

For many, one of the most deeply moving activities was the Tuesday evening vigil, crying out the names of people who have died in the desert over the past decade. As we gathered beside the port of entry, with several hundred white crosses lining the edge of the road, and three more crosses with names passed around our circle, emotions of sadness and grief welled up. One student named Maria, was struck by the number of “Maria’s” who have died. Another student who is an EMT rescue worker, acknowledged the emotional toll it must be on Border Patrol agents to find a body in the desert, or to seek to try and save the life of a desperate migrant. We ended with Mark crying to the desert, “Jesu Cristo” and all of us responding, “Presente!”

At the community center in AP where we stayed, we experienced the winter reality of the cold at night, when temperatures outside fell below freezing. Several of us were in rooms without heat, several days we showered in cold water, and we gained a new appreciation for the warmth of the bright sun as we stood in the morning rays along the street.

All of us had significant interactions with migrants: we talked briefly with four women who had just been deported at the Migrant Resource Center, two of whom were indigenous women who spoke little Spanish. That encounter was all the more poignant later that afternoon when we visited border patrol station and saw the holding cells where they had just been earlier that day. We heard difficult stories at Grupo Beta and at CAME, of men who had lived for many years in the U.S. but had recently been deported, whose wife and children were still in the U.S., did not have family or many connections in Mexico and were struggling to figure out what to do next.

When we walked to the border wall in the desert in Mexico, we encountered two border patrol agents who were eager talk with us through the thick, steel bars, to know where we were from, and when one heard we were from a Mennonite university he told us of his Christian affiliation. Yet for some of us this was a difficult moment, feeling anger and bitterness toward the men because of the militarized agency they represent, or because of how they might treat migrants they capture. They noticed how the Mexicans who were accompanying us stood away from the encounter, and they later said Mexicans never know how they might be treated by Border Patrol.

The week ended in a dramatic, frightening way. We were about to have lunch at a church member’s home just before our week finished up, when well-armed members of the drug cartel pulled up outside. We later learned they had been called by neighbors to find out who we were in our large vans - the cartel was on hyper-alert due to the killing of the AP cartel leader the night before. Miriam (correct last name) was with us and persuaded the men to leave without entering the house. After they left and throughout the rest of the afternoon, we felt the strong sense of God’s presence, protection and strength. The experience was frightening and unsettling, yet it gave us another window into the realities of life at the US/Mexico border; organizations on both sides are well armed, and daily life is not always predictable. Before leaving for Tucson that afternoon (and then on to Guatemala and Puebla, Mexico for further study) we debriefed about the experience with Mark Adams, whose pastoral care was meaningful and reassuring. Throughout the week we were thankful to be accompanied by gracious leadership from Josias Casanova, Jack Knox, our local van driver and source of wit and knowledge, and the many homes and places where we were hosted for delicious, amazing meals. The week could not have been a better time of learning for us.