Tijuana, Mexico, is a major metropolitan city, at the US-Mexican border within 20 miles of San Diego. Major highways lead to the border crossings at San Ysidro (near downtown Tijuana) and Otay (eastern fringe of Tijuana). The border crossing at San Ysidro is by far the largest and the one most often used, both for vehicles and foot traffic. Many thousands of people walk across the border daily. Seldom are there delays walking into Mexico; however the Mexican government has built vehicle inspection lanes (2013) and they are now making mostly cursory inspection of vehicles entering Mexico. (Previously vehicles entering Mexico had no inspection procedure and entry was without being stopped.)

Returning into the United States is often a memorial event. Every one is stopped for proof of US Citizenship (or other proper documentation), vehicles are subject to search and contraband is subject to seizure. Walking north across the border can be accomplished (with good luck) in half an hour, but expect delays based upon time of day and flow of foot traffic. It is more reasonable to expect delays of 90 minutes on foot. Vehicles returning to the United States at San Ysidro and Otay experience inspection delays from one to four hours on average; occasionally you wait your turn even a longer period of time. Have a reasonable amount of fuel in your vehicle; most people idle their engines the entire time while waiting.

By Car or Bus: Planning a trip by vehicle to Tijuana would be the same as planning a trip anywhere in the United States. There are two major differences, those being temporary Mexican automobile insurance and Border Patrol vehicle inspection. You should never attempt to drive your vehicle into Mexico without first obtaining temporary Mexican Vehicle Insurance. The vehicle laws in Mexico place you at a great disadvantage in an accident without Mexican insurance, which you can obtain through your current vehicle insurance company in advance of travel. You can also buy Mexican vehicle insurance at the border, but the cost may be greater and insurance coverage may be less favorable. A second consideration is the time required for vehicle inspection upon your return to the United States. If you rent a vehicle at San Diego you should purchase Mexican vehicle insurance from the rental agency. It sometime seems that residents of Mexico only consider traffic laws as an afterthought; the average American driver in Mexico will see what might be called Mexican-high-speed aggressive-sport-behind-the-wheel. You will probably see at least one vehicle accident during your visit to Tijuana, and perhaps more, depending upon your length of stay.

By Airplane: Tijuana does have an international airport, but air flights from the United States to Tijuana are extremely expensive and there are only a few gateway cities, so multiple flights would probably be necessary. On the other hand San Diego has a large, modern air terminal located near their downtown area. Major car rental agencies are
located at the airport. Airlines may provide group travel discounts. There is also a bus service directly to the San Ysidro border crossing, and a convenient bus service to the nearby downtown Santa Fe railroad depot, from which you can ride the high speed blue line trolley system to the border ($3.50 or less, each direction and group rates are available). For those who rent vehicles at the airport it is difficult to guess how long it might take to cross the border and get to the airport on time. (It can be a nail biting experience.) It might be easier to time your return if your group walks across the border both directions and depend upon others for transportation in Mexico. (see above). Another possibility would be to leave Mexico deliberately early and plan an intermediate visit to the San Diego Zoo, San Diego Balboa Park or other tourist attraction, so to better control your return to the airport. This would work best with a late afternoon or evening San Diego departure flight.

By Train: An option to be considered for Southern California groups (and others, perhaps) would be travel by Amtrak to San Diego Santa Fe Station, then travel by trolley to the border, walking across the border and relying upon Centro Shalom for transportation in Mexico. Amtrak and the San Diego trolley authority provide advance purchase discount tickets. Amtrak also has group rates and annually sells discount tickets during winter months that include travel until the summer peak season.

The Cost of Things: Do not burden yourself or your group by carrying safe drinking water or food into Mexico. Large, well stocked grocery stores in Tijuana have the food products and safe drinking water you want, at roughly the same costs you might find at your local grocery. There are two Costco stores and a Sam's Club in Tijuana. There is also a Home Depot store available to you. The cost of gasoline is about the same as you now pay in the United States. Generally speaking the cost of goods and services in the border areas of Mexico are similar to that in the United States. Bring money; it is easily carried and saves time and weight.

Housing During Your Visit: Centro Shalom at their Alamar church campus can provide housing, kitchen facilities and an assembly/dining area for groups of 25 people or less in dormitory circumstances. There is nothing fancy about this service but it comes at a reasonable cost. Expect to share toilets and showers. Do not drink tap water! A cook assistant might be arranged for, but at a cost and there is a small fleet of 48 passenger buses and passenger vans; a driver might be made available available, but at a cost. One person in your group might be tasked to carry limited medical supplies for your group, but pharmacies (drug stores) are available. Necessary prescription drugs and OTC products should be carried in their proper containers; do not carry unmarked and unidentifiable prescription drugs. There is no reason to carry a 90 day subscription supply for a 10 day visit. Another person might be tasked to carry all travel documents. Your cellphone will probably work in Mexico, but perhaps at a shocking high cost, which you discover after-the-fact, only when the bill arrives. In most cases you can buy temporary cellular service in Mexico from your current provider beforehand, often at reasonable cost. Internet service is available, but it might not be to a level of service you
expect to find. Believe it or not, your group can survive with only a few cell phones in the hands of your leaders. Individuals can survive without having a cellphone in your hand; texting is not a requirement for survival. Another housing and meal service you might consider is Puente de Amistad, a hostel service, located in Tijuana, sponsored by Open Bible churches in the United States. They can house larger groups, but the cost may be greater.

Passports and Identification: Everyone traveling to foreign countries must prove their identity before re-entering the United States. There are no exceptions to this requirement. State drivers licenses and state identification cards are not accepted forms of identification. The gold standard is a valid United States Passport, or a US Government issued border pass card can be used. It is not wise to feign ignorance of identification requirements at the border. You or perhaps your group will be greatly delayed until US Border Agents are satisfied of your citizenship status and allow you to re-enter our country. Be prepared! Be smart! It is also good practice to make a Xerox copy of your proper identification and drivers license which should be kept in your luggage or kept by a leader, but not in the same location of your true identification documents. The copied documents might be of assistance should your real documents be lost or stolen, maybe.

The people you meet in the shanty towns are mostly illegal immigrants, often of a single parent family (husbands, fathers are absent) and they are living in a Third World environment; their circumstances are near desperate. Shanty town people are “squatters”, living on the fringe of their society, without proper sanitation, lacking public services such as police, fire and ambulance service. They generally have no electricity, no telephone service, no water or sewer systems, no nearby schools no stores, no roads and very little hope for the future. There is no welfare system available for them; the Mexican authorities tend to ignore them. They may be Mexican nationals from the far south, or citizens of Central or South American countries, mostly without proper identification or travel documents, unskilled, lacking education and blocked from entering the United States illegally. Many have experienced convoluted forms of Catholicism, are very superstitious and know little about Christianity.

If you or a group of people visit Centro Shalom please leave behind a generous offering of money, supplies or equipment that you might have brought with you. This ministry needs your assistance in ministering to those in need, but they also need your monetary support. Plan ahead to depart knowing that you have bettered the ministry and the people beyond the favorable events of your visit. Remember, although your visit and help is both wanted and needed, your visit is a distraction from the ongoing work of Centro Shalom.