About 50 people from Protestant congregations around the region gathered in the miniscule border town of Havelock on Saturday afternoon, to pray, sing and speak in solidarity with migrants seeking sanctuary in Canada as part of a gathering called “Meeting Jesus at the Border.” The unofficial Roxham Road border crossing, where hundreds of people crossed on foot this summer hoping to make asylum claims, was barely 20 kilometres away.

The event, which included a bilingual service with a mass, was organized by the Anglican dioceses of Quebec and Montreal. Participants arrived from around the Eastern Townships as well as from Quebec City, Montreal, upstate New York and as far away as Toronto.

The event took on additional significance in light of recent demonstrations by anti-migration groups near the border crossing. “It’s only a small minority of people who are xenophobic in a violent way, but those people are speaking in a louder and louder voice,” said Rev. Canon Jeffrey Metcalfe of the Anglican Diocese of Quebec, who spoke during the service. “We wanted to show that there are actually a significant number of people who see refugees as a gift.”

“It’s important to clarify that this isn’t a demonstration against anything,” Metcalfe said. “Borders aren’t good or bad; it depends on how you think about them. You can use them as an excuse to tell others that they don’t belong inside your border – to define others based on what you are against – or you can use them to mark out what you are for. As a Canadian and a Quebecker, I am responsible for this space, and I’m responsible for making it as loving and as just as I can.”

Bishop Bruce Myers of the Anglican Diocese of Quebec and Bishop Mary Irwin-Gibson of the Anglican Diocese of Montreal officiated at the service.

Two of the event’s planned speakers could not attend due to a last-minute logistical problem. Metcalfe, Paul Clarke of Action Réfugiés Montréal and Jenn McIntyre of Romero House, a Toronto-based communal housing facility that hosts refugees and volunteer interns from around the world, stepped ably into the speaker gap.

“What happens if people are crossing on foot?” Clarke asked. “Have any of you read the Gospel of Matthew? What do you say to those people? Are you hungry? Let me feed you. Are you thirsty? Let me give you something to drink. Are your clothes dirty? Can I find you a washing machine? Do you need a place to stay?”

For Clarke, whose organization has sponsored hundreds of refugee families since the beginning of the Syrian crisis, prayer and action go hand in hand. He and other speakers called on those gathered to pray for refugees, their families and the anti-immigrant groups that may feel threatened by their arrival. “We can pray for these refugees, and pray for the people they’ve left behind in their countries,” Clarke said. “We can pray for people working with refugees. Pray for the United Nations and the decision makers who work [there] and in the government, and who need to be compassionate and just. But don’t just pray. Send a letter to the Minister of Immigration, and ask him to continue to act with compassion and justice. There are local elections coming up – vote! Step up and act.”

Several refugees or former refugees were present at the event, including Seun, an asylum seeker from Nigeria who didn’t want his last name used. He came to Quebec City after living briefly in the United States. “If you’re gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender, and you’re a foreigner, the United States isn’t safe anymore,” he says. “Donald Trump has emboldened people who have issues with people of a different skin colour. If I was still living in Nigeria, I could spend 10 years in prison just for running a Facebook group in support of LGBT people. In Canada, I have to put my life on hold – I can’t go to school and learn French, and I can’t find a job because I don’t speak French – but when Canada is doing you a favour, you can’t complain. I felt I had to come to this event in solidarity with other refugees.”

At the end of the service, a procession of cars travelled the short distance to the manned Covey Hill border crossing, where Myers and Irwin-Gibson placed an icon of the Good Samaritan and led a brief prayer.