



Recovering the Human Face of **IMMIGRATION** in the U.S. South

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During 2015, with the support of a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Jesuit Social Research Institute and the University of Florida's Center for Latin American Studies organized a series of guided conversations with religious leaders from a range of Christian faith traditions who have facilitated fruitful grassroots experiences of inter-cultural exchange, immigrant accompaniment and hospitality, and advocacy for immigrant justice. Many of the leaders were based in the U.S. South, a region of the country that has witnessed some of the most draconian anti-immigrant legislation in response to increased flows of immigrants to communities which previously had not been major immigrant destinations. Based on these conversations, a report was produced for interested religious and civic leaders, offering them effective strategies through which their organizations can tackle the challenges of immigration integration and advocacy.

In several discussions on the topic of immigrant justice advocacy, the need for meaningful encounters between Americans and undocumented immigrants was frequently recommended. Examples of such encounters included mission trips, table fellowship, working at hospitality houses for immigrants, intentional dialogues between native born and immigrant families, and immersion experiences that provide a close-up look at another people's culture and society. Six case studies of immigrant encounter experiences leading to immigrant advocacy are discussed in the report; we highlight just one here.

Ann Cass Williams and Holy Spirit Catholic Church, McAllen, Texas

In 1988 the bishop of the Diocese of Brownsville, John Joseph Fitzpatrick, appointed Ann Cass Williams to serve

as the Pastoral Administrator of a new parish, Holy Spirit Church, in McAllen, Texas. As Pastoral Administrator, Ann's role was essentially that of a pastor—a priest came only on Sundays to celebrate Mass and hear confessions. Because she felt that parishioners needed to be involved in church activities and in all decision-making processes impacting the parish, she immediately began to organize six commissions to deal with almost every aspect of parish life. The Family Religious Education and Catechetical Commission coordinated the baptismal program. Ann felt very strongly that baptism had to be an important conversion experience for the parents. She told parents, "Baptism is not 'fire insurance.' Don't bring your children to the water unless you really want to drink the water—because you are the person responsible for your child's faith development and for seeing that your child becomes active in the community and works for justice in the world."¹

Part of the conversion that she wanted parents to experience was to open their eyes to the suffering of the poor all around them. She felt this could best be realized by facilitating face-to-face encounters between the parents and poor residents of the valley, many of whom were immigrants. Ann told us, "Encounter is necessary to develop relationships. When you are able to talk to someone, see their faces, hear their stories—you begin to see yourself in the other."

The baptism program at Holy Spirit required that parents take an eight hour bus trip to visit three ministries that served poor immigrants in the Rio Grande Valley. Casa Romero was a shelter for refugees fleeing the civil wars in Central America located 50 miles from McAllen. The local chapter of the United Farm Workers and the Holy Family Birth Center, which provides maternal care to poor women, were the other two stops.

Prior to the bus trip some of the parents had hard-hearted attitudes towards farmworkers trying to organize or people who had crossed the border without authorization. A few even worked as Border Patrol agents. But at the ministries they visited the parents entered into conversations with farm workers who spoke about the abuse they had suffered working in the fields. Central American refugees shared horrific accounts of family members being tortured and murdered by government officials. During the long road trip Ann and other catechists facilitated discussion and analysis among the parents, and powerful, life-changing conversion experiences began to happen. In fact, in evaluations, parents frequently named the bus trip as the high point of the baptismal program.

During Ann's tenure as Parish Administrator, which ended in 1992, civil wars in Central America were raging. Because

the Rio Grande Valley community is farther south than one-third of Mexico, many refugees fleeing the wars in Central America sought to cross the border near McAllen, just as Central American refugees fleeing gang violence do today. In an effort to build understanding and solidarity with the people of El Salvador, the parish Peace and Justice Commission worked with the non-profit organization, SHARE, to develop a sister church relationship with a parish in El Salvador. This led to exchange visits of parishioners who would stay in the homes of members of their sister church.

Years later, Ann still hears stories from parishioners of the impact that the immersion and encounter experiences had on their understanding of who is their neighbor. Ann noted that many of the people who began volunteering to assist the mothers and children at the McAllen bus station during the "border surge" in the summer of 2014 had been deeply involved in immersion and encounter experiences with poor immigrants as Holy Spirit parishioners during the late 1980's and early 1990's.

Ann also believes that the immersion and encounter experiences were critical in "priming" parishioners to become involved in social justice advocacy, including the immigrant justice issues. Four to five times a year the Peace and Justice Commission would organize a letter writing campaign after Mass. While parishioners were enjoying coffee and donuts they wrote letters to their Congresspersons on some of the immigrant justice issues of the day, including the need to streamline application procedures for legalization through the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act and to end military aid to El Salvador. Whenever a speaker addressed parishioners there also would be a "call to action" afterwards involving letter writing or phone calls to elected officials.

Ann knew that she and her staff did not have the time to collect the facts or present the stories like nonprofits committed to immigrant justice could. The relationships of trust between nonprofits working for peace and justice and parishioners primed to work for social justice through powerful encounter and immersion experiences with marginalized people made Holy Spirit Church a strong and reliable ally in the struggle for justice in the Rio Grande Valley and the world.

ENDNOTES

¹ Fred Kammer, SJ, Sue Weishar, Philip Williams, *Recovering the Human Face of Immigration in the U.S. South*, October, 2016 at www.loyno.edu/jsri. All information in this article is from that report, copies of which can be downloaded from the JSRI website.