

'Let Justice Roll Down Like Waters' Leadership Academy on Social Justice Organizing

By Adriana García and Kathy Staudt

In the title's Biblical quote, (Amos 5:24), we are reminded about the call to work for justice in this world. The EPISO-Border Interfaith Leadership Academy on June 15-16 at Christ the Savior Catholic Church in northeast El Paso provided a listening and learning opportunity to heed the call. At the Leadership Academy, senior Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) community organizers Sr. Maribeth Larkin and Joe Rubio offered participatory training on broad-based community organizing. Both trainers once served as Organizers for EPISO in previous decades. Leaders from the forty-year-old EPISO and decade-old Border Interfaith, both affiliated with the IAF, also helped facilitate small-group meetings, known in the IAF as "House Meetings."

A full 83 registrants participated in the Leadership Academy from many institutions in the El Paso region. The institutions ranged from faith-based organizations like Catholic and Protestant churches to educational institutions and nonprofit organizations that serve the community, such as Hope Border Institute, Project Arriba, and Ciudad Nueva among others. Through "Relational Meetings," participants had the opportunity to begin to develop relationships of trust with one another.

The Leadership Academy began with Sr. Maribeth describing broad-based organizations and their members: institutions and Leaders within those institutions. Then EPISO and Border Interfaith Leaders highlighted some major accomplishments over the years of social justice work in El Paso.

EPISO/Border Interfaith's past and recent achievements are many. In the 1980s and 1990s, EPISO worked with IAF affiliates around the state to secure water and sewer services in *colonias*. EPISO facilitated the quality workforce training program, Project Arriba, which partners with El Paso Community College to train and place over 1,350 people who once earned minimum wages to professional jobs in the health sector earning more than \$40,000 annually. Leaders also outlined recent achievements: regulations around payday lenders who charge exorbitant interest and fees; procedures with "teeth" to deter wage theft; and public health clinics in outlying areas.

The Leadership Academy continued with a workshop on "The Cycle of Organizing," beginning with one-to-one relational conversations to House Meetings, research action and power analysis, public action, and evaluation. Joe Rubio continued with discussions of "Power," defined as the ability to get things done, including relational power and the power of numbers, both of which can counter the extreme power of money in public life. He continued with focus about "The Pressures on Families," comparing the distant past of mediating institutions (such as churches and extended families), now weakened in contemporary society.

Participants joined small-group "House Meetings" to tell their stories about health and health crises and institutional small-group "Team Meetings" to discuss their next steps. As the meeting closed, participants used one-word phrases to evaluate their experience at the Leadership Academy: "hopeful," "exhilarating," "excited," "energized," "informative," and more.

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For more information about the IAF organizations, call the EPISO-Border Interfaith office 778-3200 or visit the website: www.borderinterfaith.org.