

A Gathering of Immigrants

By Jack Herbig

On Pentecost, May 20th, the Walking Together ministry of St. Mary's by-the-Sea Episcopal Church and La Iglesia de San Pablo Apostol sponsored a "Gathering of Immigrants." One hundred parishioners from the two congregations, as well as guests from All Saints Episcopal Church in Carmel met at St. Mary's to have lunch and each share a piece of their families' immigration story. St. Mary's in Pacific Grove is home to many English-speaking retirees, while San Pablo's in Seaside is made up of first generation Spanish-speaking immigrants. The event was co-chaired by Father Martin Juarez, from San Pablo's and Kirsten Matsumoto from St. Mary's.

When people spoke from the podium at the front of the room, they spoke in either English or Spanish, whichever they preferred. As is fitting on Pentecost, headsets and a professional interpreter made it possible for "everyone to hear the Word in their own language."

People sat at tables of six, made up of people from both congregations. Each table also had a person who is bilingual, and a table leader whose job was to be sure that everyone had a chance to tell part of their story. Some people told stories of crossing the border in search of opportunity, others spoke of grandparents escaping persecution, and many told of their ancestors making their way out of poverty, coming to a land where hard work would pay off for future generations.

Canon Jesus Reyes put these stories into the context of the Judeo-Christian tradition: how are we to treat the stranger, the outsider? Katherine Herbig, a parishioner at St. Mary's, put the individual immigration stories into the context of American Immigration history. She demonstrated that immigration has been contentious throughout our history, with each successive wave of immigrants being resented by those who had come previously. She described a recent gathering in Salinas where representatives from Agriculture, Construction, and the Hospitality industries in Monterey County all said that their businesses could not survive without the labor of recent immigrants. She concluded saying that Federal immigration policy is broken; it doesn't meet the needs of either employers or of families.

St. Mary's Walking Together ministry was a founding member of Communities Organized for Relational Power in Action, COPA, a broad-based, non-partisan organization of 28 institutional members. The majority of these institutions are religious congregations in Monterey, Santa Cruz, and San Benito counties, that have agreed to work together to improve the lives of the people in our region. COPA does its work by sharing stories and building relationships, first within institutions and then across institutions. Members of Walking Together and parishioners from San Pablo have been in conversations for over a year. It is in these conversations where they developed the trust that was at the center of this immigration event. Walking Together and San Pablo's also worked together on the creation of Esperanza Care, a Monterey County program that provides healthcare to 3,500 low income adults, who don't qualify for other health insurance. Many parishioners at San Pablo's receive healthcare through this program.