News



Rubén Zamora (Eric Bridiers/United States Mission Geneva)



by Dan Morris-Young

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An interfaith social justice advocacy program that had broadening success in San Diego has been re-tooled and re-established in Boston where its first major speaker of the 2017-18 academic year will be El Salvador's ambassador to the United Nations, Rubén Zamora.

Zamora's Oct. 10 free public address will focus on causes, challenges and potential approaches regarding undocumented refugee migration into the U.S. from Latin America and other areas, according to Jesuit Fr. Peter Gyves, founder of A Faith That Does Justice, Inc.

A seminarian briefly in his youth, Zamora has been deeply involved in El Salvador's tumultuous history since the early 1970s. He fled the country in 1979 after a military-controlled government assumed power, spending most of his time in Nicaragua and Mexico, before returning to El Salvador in 1987 as an opposition leader.

Prior to his departure, his brother, Mario, had been assassinated. During his exile, Zamora was banned from entering the U.S. due to U.S. support of El Salvador's oligarchy.

In 1991 Zamora was elected to the legislative assembly and named one of its vice presidents. He served as a member of the country's Peace Commission that led to the signing of peace accords in 1992, ending El Salvador's civil war. He lost in bids for the nation's presidency in 1994 and 1999, before holding posts as ambassador to India and the United States. Zamora was appointed to the U.N. in 2013.

Given the resurgence of news about the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, known as DACA, it is "likely," Gyves told NCR, that questions and comments about the current debate over the program will become part of the discussion with Zamora.

DACA shields from deportation roughly 800,000 people under the age of 35 brought to the United States as children. Begun five years ago, the administrative program allows those with DACA status to legally work and study in the U.S.

President Donald Trump has advocated ending it.

This community meeting will be held at Boston's Episcopal Cathedral Church of St. Paul. The event will begin at 6:15 p.m.

Gyves, who will interview Zamora during the Oct. 10 assembly, told NCR that he and Zamora became friends during the late 1980s and early 1990s during his humanitarian medical work in El Salvador in the midst of that country's civil war.

Three other community meetings are on the docket of A Faith That Does Justice through next June, all at Cathedral Church of St. Paul.

On Dec. 12 Rosanne Haggerty, president and CEO of Community Solutions, will speak on homelessness. A MacArthur Foundation Fellow, Haggerty "has been recognized for redeveloping the Times Square Hotel in New York City and reducing homelessness by 87 percent in the 20-block area surrounding it," states the A Faith That Does Justice website.

Topics and speakers for March 13 and June 5, 2018, are yet to be announced.

At community meetings, "speakers are filmed and their presentations are disseminated through social media. We also provide simultaneous translation of the presentation so that everyone in attendance can understand the content of the talk and have a voice during the subsequent discussions," reports the A Faith That Does Justice website.

While the community meetings are the organization's most high-profile effort, its grassroots advocacy and education work are equally important, Gyves said. In addition to monthly workshop meetings, A Faith That Does Justice sponsors "community service outreach projects" that "seek to live faith in action."

Their intent is to "bring about change socially, politically and economically by unleashing the power of our diverse cultural and spiritual heritages," Gyves said

"Our initial outreach and ministry will be an ESL [English as a Second Language] initiative," he continued. "Our intent is to offer ESL to participants of A Faith That Does Justice and those in the downtown area of Boston who have recently arrived in the United States and have need of better language and social interaction skills to obtain employment and live successfully in this country."

Establishing A Faith That Does Justice, Inc. in Boston was born of "an invitation from the Jesuit provincial of the Northeast Province of the Society of Jesus to bring this

ministry to Jesuit offices at 300 Newbury St., so that a Jesuit presence and commitment to social justice might be witnessed in the heart of the city of Boston," Gyves stated.

Even though A Faith That Does Justice is interfaith, it is rooted in Ignatian spirituality, he added.

Boston workshops began in March 2017 and have attracted about 150 participants, Gyves said, "with an equal representation of English and Spanish speakers."

A Faith That Does Justice was piloted at Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish in Barrio Logan, a heavily Mexican neighborhood of San Diego, before being moved to Boston.

"Boston and San Diego are distinct cities. While both have significant African and African-American populations, the Spanish-speaking population in San Diego is almost exclusively Mexican. In Boston, the Spanish-speaking community is represented by more than 20 countries," said Gyves, who is fluent in Spanish and French.

"In addition, it has large Brazilian, Haitian and Asian populations," he said. Moreover, according to Gyves, "Boston is a politically liberal-progressive city, making social justice an easy message to promote here. Finally, there are many nonprofit organizations in Boston, a reality that has helped us refine our mission and outreach."

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To get out the word about A Faith That Does Justice, Gyves said, meetings have taken place with Boston religious leaders, telephone teams have been formed, and social media strategies employed.

One of the group's greatest challenges has been "gaining the trust" of "the many vulnerable people who are undocumented," Gyves said. "They live in the shadows and in constant fear of being detected and deported," he explained.

"Gaining their trust to attend our workshops has not been an easy task. Nevertheless, we are making progress in establishing credibility with these recently arrived people by continually emphasizing our desire to walk in solidarity with them

as they find their way in this country."

Feedback has been positive, the Jesuit said, "especially in the aftermath of the recent national elections. In fact, a number of people have stated our program offers them an opportunity to live their faith with more of a social commitment than they have in the past, especially now that they recognize the troubling possibility of significant cutbacks in social programs in the U.S."

A physician as well as a priest, Gyves said he "provided health care as a layperson in some of El Salvador's marginal communities and conflictive war zones ... during part of the civil war that ravaged that country in the 1980s and early 1990s."

"It was as a result of this experience that I entered the Society of Jesus," said Gyves who has also done social justice ministry in Guatemala, Africa and briefly in China.

[Dan Morris-Young is NCR's West Coast correspondent. His email is dmyoung@ncronline.org.]