



Together

MINISTRY IN THE RIO GRANDE AT THE BORDER

Bilingual Eucharist Celebrated in Waters of the Rio Grande at Texas Border Crossing Party

By David Paulsen, Episcopal News Service

For the second year, members of the board of RGBM and members from Good Shepherd in Silver City and St. James' in Alpine, joined with hundreds of others at Lajitas, Texas, to celebrate *Voices from Both Sides/Voces de Ambos Ladoss*, a popular event that celebrates the unity of peoples across the Rio Grande. Fr. Paul Moore, Pastor Sarah Guck and many assistants, celebrated a bilingual Eucharist in the middle of the river and distributed communion to any who wished to participate on both sides of the international boundary.

Unlike last year, when the river was only knee-deep, changes in the channeling of the river made a boat necessary in chest-deep water. Gratitude is due the good people at *Otra Vez* who were hugely instrumental making this event a possibility once again. "For me, it was a statement that borders are political, not spiritual, realities," Moore told Episcopal News Service. "That people in the church are joined and are one."

The U.S. government previously declined to actively patrol the Lajitas Crossing, and Mexicans and Americans passed freely across the river to visit relatives, shop, attend school and work. That changed on Mother's Day weekend in 2002, when U.S. authorities detained 20 people on immigration charges and made clear they were ending the open passage as part of an effort to secure the border after the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks. Now, anyone entering the U.S. by crossing the river at Lajitas risks arrest.

Except on this one day.

Starting in 2013, the organizers of *Voices from Both Sides* arranged for federal and local authorities to bend the rules for a few hours, allowing for this border-straddling party, with music, food, drinks and religious worship. "The organizations have kept us informed since the beginning, and basically no one is crossing the border, so no laws are being broken," Bill Brooks, U.S. Customs and Border Protection spokesman, told the San Antonio Express-News in a story about the third *Voices From Both Sides*. People from both sides meet in the middle of the river but end the day back on the side where they live.

"I hope it continues, because it's just a day," said Marcy Reed, an Episcopalian who lives about 15 minutes away in Terlingua. She and her husband are teachers at the Terlingua school, and some of their students have family members back in Mexico. *Voices From Both Sides* is a way for those relatives and friends to reconnect without having to drive hours out of their way, she said. "I was really nervous last year with Trump in office," she said. Would President Trump's stance on immigration mean an end to *Voices From Both Sides*? "I really wasn't sure it was going to happen. It still did."

Last year, the Episcopal service was first on the day's lineup at 10:30 am, which meant the sound system hadn't been set up yet and only about 150 to 200 people had arrived for the day's festivities. Even so, about 30 people from both sides of the river received communion.

"We'd love to have more people join us," he said. In addition to his parish duties, Moore is chair of Rio Grande Borderland Ministries.

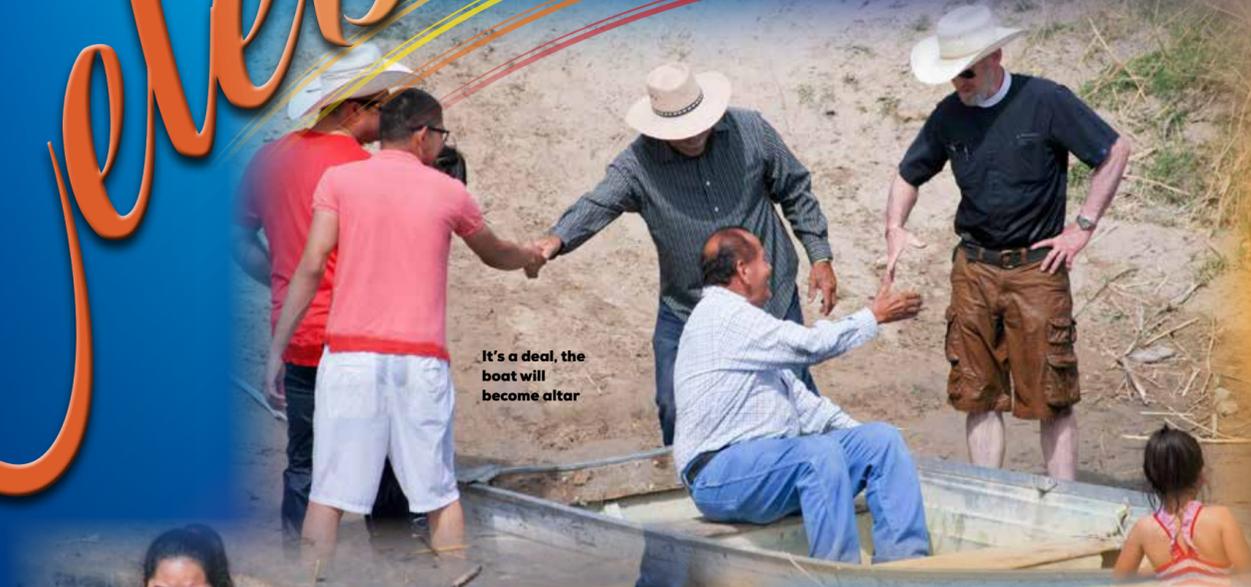
The Diocese of the Rio Grande is the largest among the contiguous 48 state and covers 800 miles of border in Texas and New Mexico. Moore's church is about 90 miles away from Mexico, and he works with other churches along the border on a unified ministry that "focuses on the needs of the border in every way," he said. The church is engaged in issues such as poverty and hunger, as well as immigration. "Christian beliefs have political implications," he said. "And one of the political implications here is, you can divide us politically, but you cannot divide us spiritually."

Residents of the Big Bend region of Texas, however, also are divided by and forced to overcome great geographic distances. Reed and her husband sometimes drive 80 miles to attend St. James' Episcopal Church in Alpine, Texas, because services are sporadic at Santa Inez in Terlingua. Along the way, they take advantage of the better grocery options in Alpine.

They sometimes take trips into Mexico, such as when a student invites them to a quinceañera, a 15th birthday celebration, in San Carlos. The community of Paso Lajitas on the Mexican side of the Rio Grande has all but dried up since the river crossing closed. Now, a trip that once took a few minutes by pickup truck across the river instead takes three or four hours by way of the official border crossing to the west in Presidio, Texas.

It's hard for Reed to imagine a terrorist using Lajitas as an entry point into the U.S. "It would be such a crazy place to cross. There's just nothing here," she said. At the same time, "I don't think anyone's coming over here stealing anyone's jobs in Terlingua," she said. There aren't a lot of jobs to steal. Before the federal government cracked down on river crossings, the flow of people in both directions knit together the communities on both sides of the river, Reed said.

Celebrations



It's a deal, the boat will become altar



Family crossing



Tradition and Culture



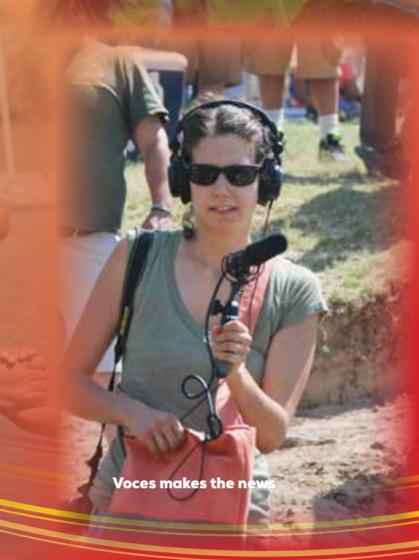
Fr. Paul and Rev. Sarah



Gifts from Mexico



Together again



Voces makes the news



A woman priest!