

What Might it Mean to Be a Sanctuary Church Body?

By Bishop Larry Wohlrabe and Bishop-Elect Bill Tesch, NW MN Synod ELCA

On Wednesday, August 7, 2019, voting members of the ELCA Churchwide Assembly adopted a memorial that included an amendment “to declare the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America a sanctuary church body.” (The full text of the memorial is available at <http://nwmnsynod.org/resources/ca19-03-11-churchwide-memorial-declaring-the-elca-a-sanctuary-church-body/>)

Unfortunately this action was picked up by a national cable news network that broadcast a five minute “discussion” by three panelists, none of whom were present at the Churchwide Assembly, nor are they members of the ELCA or authorized to speak on behalf of the ELCA. The broadcast conveyed misinformation about the Assembly’s action, implying that ELCA congregations would simply ignore U.S. law, **which is not true.** Also, a panelist implied that undocumented immigrants carry disease and pose a public health risk, **which is also not true.**

So what might it actually mean for our ELCA to be a “sanctuary church body?” In response to this legitimate question, ELCA leaders familiar with our church’s strategy for engaging issues around immigration and refugees have offered the following information:

- In its simplest form, becoming a sanctuary denomination means that the ELCA is **publicly declaring** that walking alongside immigrants and refugees is a matter of faith. The ELCA Churchwide Assembly, the highest legislative authority of the ELCA, declared that when we preach on Sunday that Jesus told us to welcome, we will use our hands and voices on Monday to make sure it happens.
- We have a broken system regarding immigration, refugees and asylum-seekers. To declare ourselves a sanctuary church body is to say that we seek to provide concrete resources to assist the most vulnerable who are feeling the sharp edges of this broken system.
- Being a sanctuary denomination is about loving our neighbors. While we may have different ideas about how to fix this broken system and may have different ways of loving our neighbors, our call to love our neighbor is central to our faith.
- Being a sanctuary denomination will look different in different contexts. It may mean providing space for people to live; providing financial and legal support to those who are working through the immigration system; or supporting other congregations and service providers. The ELCA churchwide organization cannot mandate or direct our congregations and ministries to respond in specific ways. Each must work out what this means for them in their context.

- While we don't yet know the full scope of the work that this declaration will open for the ELCA, we do know that our faith communities are already doing sanctuary work. Sanctuary for a congregation may mean hosting English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, marching as people of faith against the detention of children and families, providing housing for a community member facing deportation, or, in some of our congregations, having thoughtful conversations about what our faith says about immigration. All of these are a step closer to sanctuary in our faith communities and sanctuary in our world for people who must leave their homes.
- Except for our members whose ancestors were here before European settlement or others who were forced to come to the U.S. against their will, the ELCA is an immigrant church. Our decades-long work with immigrants and refugee is how we practice our faith in the world. Lutherans started Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS), one of the nine refugee resettlement agencies in the U.S.
- At our 2016 Churchwide Assembly, we also committed to walking alongside Central American children and families fleeing their communities by passing the AMMPARO strategy (*Accompanying Migrant Minors with Protection, Advocacy, Representation and Opportunities*).
- Through the AMMPARO strategy, we are also working through our global partners in Central America to alleviate the conditions that cause people to migrate. We support organizations and faith communities that work with deported migrants in Central America and advocate for the humane treatment of immigrants in Mexico. In the U.S., we have a network of 151 welcoming and sanctuary congregations that are committed to working on migration issues and a welcome for immigrant communities. The church also has five sanctuary synods (our regional structures), all of which do work with immigrants, refugees and asylum-seekers.
- In baptism, we are brought into a covenantal relationship with Jesus Christ that commits us to strive for justice and peace in all the earth. Following the example of Martin Luther, we believe that advocacy is a crucial expression of baptismal identity. As a church, we have advocated for stopping the detention of children and families for decades. We have spoken out against family separation, sought a pathway to citizenship for community members that have lived in the U.S. for many years, and have taken steps to address the root causes of migration in a way that honors the humanity in people who must flee.
- Being a sanctuary denomination means that we, as church together, want to be public and vocal about this work. At the same time, we will have conversations about what sanctuary means with many of our members and discern future action and direction. For us, welcoming people is first and foremost

a matter of faith which impacts how we live out all our vocations in God's world, including our political life.

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"When Jesus died, something happened as a result of which the world was a different place. By six o'clock on the evening of the first Good Friday, the world had changed. A revolution had begun." N.T. Wright, The Day the Revolution Began, p. 355.