

Background

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) has a strong history of welcoming the stranger. The commitment of the church to welcome migrants, refugees, asylum seekers and their families has been strengthened by our relationships with companion churches and our partnership with Lutheran and faith-based organizations, particularly Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS) in the United States.

Lutherans have a deep rooted history in refugee and immigrant issues. After World War II, one of every six Lutherans in the world was a refugee or displaced person. The strong immigrant roots and vibrant immigrant members led to Lutheran church bodies establishing LIRS in 1939 as the national organization to serve uprooted people. LIRS and the ELCA have long advocated for the protection of vulnerable populations and family unification in immigration policies. LIRS has taken a leadership role in creating forums in which the members and leaders of the ELCA learn about the policy positions of the ELCA and discuss the necessity of immigration reform, the importance of family unity, and the humane enforcement of U.S. immigration laws.

Family unity and the acknowledgment that there is God-given dignity in all people has been a cornerstone of advocacy by the ELCA and LIRS. Despite our efforts, the number of migrants detained by immigration officials skyrocket in the last two decades due to policies that criminalize all migrants. President Obama has deported almost 2.5 million people, many of whom are parents to U.S. citizen children. These enforcement policies and practices can leave any non-citizen, including green card holders, asylum-seekers, trafficking victims, and torture survivors, at risk of detention and deportation.

The lack of protection under the law for approximately 11 million undocumented immigrants, leaves millions of members of our communities, including U.S. citizen children, incredibly vulnerable. According to estimations by the Migration Policy Institute, approximately 4.1 million U.S. born children have undocumented parents. Children with parents that have been deported suffer economic and psychological consequences, including [“psychological trauma, material hardship, residential instability, family dissolution, increased use of public benefits and, among boys, aggression.”](#)

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has announced that it will continue to target Central American children and families for deportation. The ELCA continues to honor its immigrant roots by our support of migrant ministries and advocating for laws that focus on love, family and welcoming the stranger.

Congregations all over the country, have answered the call to protect and care for our neighbor by providing physical sanctuary to immigrants and their families facing deportation. This has meant providing shelter and all other necessities to an immigrant that has been given an order to return to their countries of origin by the DHS. Today, there are 50 congregations from different denominations across the U.S. offering sanctuary and 300 congregations that support it. This movement to provide physical protection from deportation is called the new sanctuary movement.

Actions

Lutheran congregations played a key role in the beginning of the sanctuary movement in the 1980s to protect Central Americans fleeing civil wars. In 1989, the ELCA adopted a social policy resolution to extend hospitality and support to Central American refugees and continue working with LIRS to provide them asylum. More recently, since 2014, after thousands of children and families were displaced from their communities, the ELCA has developed a comprehensive, whole church strategy to protect and welcome Central American children: Accompanying Migrant Minors with Protection, Advocacy, Representation and Opportunities (AMMPARO). This strategy was affirmed by the Church Council in 2016.

ELCA resolutions support uniting families as a basic principle of our immigration laws and actions by the church. The 1998 Church Council resolution, “Message on Migration,” highlights the importance of family unity in immigration and highlights that “The existence of a permanent sub-group of people who live without recourse to effective legal protection opens the door for their massive abuse and exploitation and harms the common good.” This resolution relies on two bible passages that guide the ELCA’s view of migration: “The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the stranger as yourself, for you were strangers in

the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God” (Leviticus 19:34) and “I was a stranger and you welcomed me” (Matthew 25:35).

In the 2009 social policy resolution, “Toward Compassionate, Just, and Wise Immigration Reform,” the ELCA speaks out against inhumane detention and deportation practices. In addition, the social policy resolution, “Immigration Detention,” encourages congregations to be part of the detention visitation ministries coordinated by LIRS while also informing others about issues around detention and deportation.

The ELCA also addressed opposing unjust and inhumane laws in the 2011 social policy resolution, “Immigrant Welcome,” states:

“RESOLVED, that the 2011 Churchwide Assembly declare its support of and encouragement for all efforts to prevent the enactment of punitive and unjust federal and state laws that target immigrants...

RESOLVED, that all members of this church, including its leaders, be encouraged to protest laws and proposed laws that ignore the Bible’s witness to care for the stranger among us and to serve all people and strive for justice and peace in all the earth, by communicating with legislators, governors, and the media; participating in public gatherings opposing unjust immigration policies; and taking all actions that demonstrate welcome and live out accompaniment of immigrants...”

Today, many of the ELCA’s nearly 10,000 congregations provide critical services to migrant populations, spread the word of welcome, and advocate for fair and humane immigration policies that honor the gift of family. Thanks to LIRS leadership staff, a number of Bishops have visited immigration detention centers and testified before Congress on the concerns related to treatment of immigrants in detention and in the process of being deported.

In the ELCA, Augustana Lutheran Church in Portland, OR gave sanctuary in 2014 to Francisco Aguirre, a migrant from El Salvador facing deportation. Aguirre’s case is ongoing, which means he has not been granted relief from deportation. In addition to Augustana Lutheran Church, Angelica Lutheran Church in Los Angeles and Lutheran Church of the Good Shepard in Brooklyn, among others have joined the new sanctuary movement. A comprehensive list of Lutheran churches involved in the movement does not exist.

Recommendation for Assembly Action

To receive with gratitude the memorials of the Oregon synod regarding the sanctuary movement;

To reaffirm, the ELCA’s partnership with LIRS in calling for fair and compassionate immigration policies and practices that keep families together;

To encourage all ELCA synods, congregations, and members to advocate for legislation that ‘welcomes the stranger’ to our country and to our communities;

To refer to the Domestic Mission unit of the church, for report to the Church Council, a request to examine the opportunities and implications that would be presented by the ELCA endorsing the practice of congregations offering Sanctuary and of the ELCA declaring itself a Sanctuary church; and

To refer to the Domestic Mission unit of the church the request to make resources available for congregations who wish to consider or offer Sanctuary.