



August 12, 2019

Dear friends,

The ELCA, meeting in Milwaukee for Churchwide Assembly, became the first denomination to declare itself “a sanctuary church body”.

There will be lots of conversation about this action in the days and weeks ahead. As a variety of news channels have picked up on this story and chosen to tell it through their own lens, here are some things to keep in mind as you evaluate the information you are hearing and choosing how to respond.

Below are some summary points regarding this action, given by the ELCA Churchwide office:

- The Churchwide Assembly’s declaration that the ELCA is a sanctuary denomination binds only the ELCA Churchwide Organization; it does not bind congregations, synods, or other organizations;
- The Churchwide Assembly did not call for any illegal actions. All actions mentioned by the Churchwide Assembly are legal, and whether any person or organization chooses to engage in civil disobedience (and therefore accept the consequences) is up to them;
- The Churchwide Assembly did not define what it means to be a sanctuary denomination, but rather requested that the ELCA Church Council provide guidance as to what it means to be a sanctuary denomination.

In the ELCA, each congregation will decide how and if it will be involved in sanctuary ministry. This decision by the Churchwide Assembly does not mandate or obligate congregations to do anything specifically. 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.

While we don’t know all the implications of this action, some congregations are already doing sanctuary work. Some congregations are already offering 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. In some of congregations, it may mean having thoughtful conversations about what our faith says about immigration. To declare ourselves a sanctuary church body says that we seek to provide concrete resources to assist the most vulnerable who are feeling the sharp edges of the broken system immigration system.

In 2016 the Churchwide Assembly established the [AMMPARO strategy](#) (Accompanying Migrant Minors with Protection, Advocacy, Representation and Opportunities) to walk alongside Central American children and families fleeing their communities. Through the AMMPARO strategy, *Welcoming Congregations* work on migration issues and welcome immigrants into their communities. Currently 151 welcoming and sanctuary congregations around the country form an active network. *Welcoming Congregations* support organizations and faith communities that work with deported migrants in Central America and advocate for

the humane treatment of immigrants in Mexico. The ELCA also has five sanctuary synods, all of which do work with immigrants, refugees and asylum-seekers. Through our global partners in Central America we work to alleviate the conditions that cause people to migrate.

In baptism, we are brought into a covenant 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.

Being a sanctuary denomination means that we, as church together, want to be public and vocal about this work of welcoming, caring for, and advocating for those whose lives are disrupted by migration. At the same time, we will have conversations about what sanctuary means with many of our members and discern future action and direction. Welcoming people is not a political issue for us, it is a matter of faith.

I will be working with synod staff and others to decide what other resources will be helpful to congregations and ministries in facilitating healthy conversation and action around these issues. Watch for more information in the weeks ahead. Thank you for your prayers and participation in this important work!

In Christ,

+Pedro

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