



East Central Synod of Wisconsin

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

August 14, 2019

Dear Pastors, Deacons and Lay Leaders in East Central Wisconsin,

Grace and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

The ELCA Churchwide Assembly concluded a few days ago in Milwaukee. Seventeen voting members from this synod gathered with 950 voting members from all across the United States and the Caribbean. Our time together was centered in prayer and worship as we sought to do the will of God. We commend all our work to the mercy of God. In whatever way we were in the right, we pray God will strengthen our resolve. In whatever way we were amiss, we pray God will continue to shape us.

There was a lot accomplished at the assembly and a summary of those actions will be forthcoming. Among those many actions taken by the assembly one has been making the headlines around the country. The ELCA declared itself to be a sanctuary church body and then directed the ELCA Church Council to provide guidance to all three expressions of the church (churchwide, synods and congregations) about what this means. I want to offer my reflections as bishop of this synod and suggest what this means for us as Church.

The action of the assembly grows out of this Church's 80-year history of ministry with immigrants and refugees. The Gospel of Jesus Christ compels us through love of neighbor to welcome the stranger and care for the neighbor in need. Thus in response to human need in World War II Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services was founded. Through decades of service throughout the world LIRS has become a leader among nine refugee resettlement agencies.

People migrate for a lot of different reasons. Some are desperate for jobs or food. Climate change is forcing some to leave their homeland. Others are fleeing violence and persecution. Most people do not want to leave their homeland. So when they do flee, migration is most often a matter of life and death. We live at a time when 69.5 million people worldwide have been displaced from their homelands, a historic level. The suffering is real and people's lives are at stake.

As the wealthiest and most powerful nation in the world the United States has the capacity to be a leader in addressing this humanitarian crisis. But our immigration system is broken with antiquated laws that no longer serve the country or human need. In more recent years politics has been a divisive force instead of helping to find a solution. In this quagmire the Church has said we are here for the sake of people, to keep families united, to address human need, to care for the stranger, to witness to Christ's love.

At the 2016 Churchwide Assembly the ELCA committed itself to walk alongside Central American families fleeing violence. Our pastors and lay leaders in Central America give us firsthand accounts of the violence people are fleeing. The AMMPARO Strategy (Accompanying Migrant Minors with Protection, Advocacy and Opportunities) has brought help, hope and healing to children and youth through the work of our churches and ministries.

Now in the 2019 Assembly the ELCA has declared itself to be a sanctuary church body. What this means, first and foremost, is that we will continue to advocate for immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers. It means we will continue to provide concrete resources in ministering to human need. We want to do whatever we can to

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assist the most vulnerable.

This commitment led me and many others to take part in a prayer vigil outside the offices of the Department of Homeland Security in Milwaukee during the assembly. We did so as a protest against current policies, especially those that lead to the separation of children from their parents and the expulsion of those who work hard and long to be lawful citizens of this land.

I readily recognize there are many viewpoints related to immigrants and refugees and the extent to which this country provides asylum and opens its borders to others. Good people can disagree while working toward a just and humane solution.

I also recognize there will be disagreements among us in the Church. I hope and pray we will stay connected and talk about these important matters. The United States of America needs us to have civil and respectful conversation about these urgent issues. This goes to the very soul of who we are as a people in this land.

What does it mean to be a sanctuary church body? I expect we will discover there are many different ways that congregations and synods will live into this decision. I think it begins with taking to heart the action of the assembly and listening to the voice of others. Love of God leads to love of neighbor. Loving the neighbor begins with listening to their story, be that the story of the refugee at our border or our neighbor in the pew.

The assembly is not asking any congregation or individual to do anything illegal. It is our right to advocate, our lawful right to participate in the democracy. It is our right to do acts of mercy and extend arms of hospitality. Those actions may rub up against the law of the land when your neighbor is a DACA recipient or an immigrant who lives and works in the shadows.

Congregations need to know that sanctuary has no legal standing. While the local congregation was perhaps once thought of as a sanctuary, a place of freedom from the long arm of the law, sanctuary has no legal standing in this country.

I believe it was Dietrich Bonhoeffer who said it is the call of every Christian to seek to know and to do the will of God. These are days for discernment, for seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit in these present times.

As seek to live out our baptismal call and witness to God's love for all, I offer this prayer from Evangelical Lutheran Worship:

Grant, O God, that your holy and life-giving Spirit may move every heart; that the barriers dividing us may crumble, suspicions disappear, and hatreds cease; and that, with our divisions healed, we might live in justice and peace; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (Evangelical Lutheran Worship, page 79)

In the love and peace of Christ,



Gerald L Mansholt
Bishop