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To Members of
The Nebraska Synod ELCA

6757 Newport Avenue, Suite 200
Omaha, NE 68152
402.896.5311 [FAX 402.896.5354]
brianmaas@nebraskasynod.org

Dear Church:

I'm writing you briefly today about actions of the 2019 ELCA Churchwide Assembly that concluded in Milwaukee just two days ago. Among the many actions taken was the adoption of a motion that the ELCA "declares itself a sanctuary church body." That brief phrase is open to myriad interpretations, and the motion of which it was a part was amended to direct the ELCA Church Council to "provide guidance for the three expressions of this church about what it means to be a sanctuary church body."

Confusion about what the phrase may or may not mean was intensified following reports of the action through a variety of media outlets, and even more so following a panel discussion on Fox News—a panel that included no representative of the ELCA to respond to a number of misunderstandings and misstatements within that discussion.

I am attaching the language of the motion itself as well as a set of talking points developed by my colleague, Bishop Paul Erickson of the Greater Milwaukee Synod. Additional communications are being developed by the ELCA Churchwide Office as I write this.

As the attached points make clear, there will be a variety of interpretations of exactly what "sanctuary church body" means, and a variety of ways in which that identity will be lived out. I can tell you with clarity the following:

- The ELCA is not mandating (and cannot mandate) that its congregations engage in *any* practice, related to sanctuary or otherwise
- The ELCA is not condoning or advocating illegal conduct on the part of its congregations or members
- The ELCA is not recommending any specific way(s) for each congregation and member to practice sanctuary
- The ELCA is renewing its public commitment to take concrete action to fulfill scripture's mandate to welcome strangers—including immigrants and refugees—and provide for their needs
- The ELCA is renewing its commitment to advocating for reform in our nation's broken immigration system and for humane treatment of immigrants and refugees
- The ELCA is renewing its commitment to the AMMPARO (Accompanying Migrant Minors with Protection, Advocacy, Representation and Opportunities) initiative

I will be communicating again with you soon about this particular action of the Churchwide Assembly as well as others. It seemed to me important to get clear, basic information out to you soon so that you are able to respond to those who may bring you their questions.

With gratitude for your partnership and prayers for your ministry,

Brian D Maas, Bishop



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

What does becoming a sanctuary denomination mean for the ELCA?

- 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. We 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 church, 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 decadeslong work with immigrants and refugee *is* how we practice our faith in the world. Lutherans started Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, one of the nine refugee resettlement agencies in the U.S.
- At our last 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. Welcoming people is not a political issue for us, it is a matter of faith.
 - Talking points from AMMPARO and Bishop Paul Erickson, Greater Milwaukee Synod

This is the final wording of the motion passed in Milwaukee. The initial motion was the recommendation of the Memorials Committee. The first amendment from the floor of the Assembly is noted *in italics*. The additional amendment from the floor is underlined.

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To receive with gratitude the memorial from the Metropolitan New York Synod concerning sanctuary;

To reaffirm the long-term and growing commitment of this church to migrants and refugees and to the policy questions involved, as exemplified most recently in the comprehensive strategy Accompanying Migrant Minors with Protection, Advocacy, Representation and Opportunities (AMMPARO);

To recognize that the ELCA in congregations, synods and the churchwide organization are already taking the actions requested by this memorial; and

To request that appropriate staff on the AMMPARO team, LIRS and the Domestic Mission, Global Mission, and Mission Advancement units review the existing strategies and practices by the five current sanctuary synods and develop a plan for additional tools that provide for education and discernment around sanctuary;

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America declares itself a sanctuary church body; and

To request the ELCA Church Council, in consultation with the appropriate churchwide units and offices, provide guidance for the three expressions of this church about what it means to be a sanctuary church body and provide a report to the 2022 Churchwide Assembly