



Southwestern Washington Synod

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

The Rev. Richard E. Jaech, Bishop

13 August 2019

From Bishop Rick Jaech

Dear Pastors, Deacons and Congregations,

Eight members of the Southwestern Washington Synod, including myself, just returned from the Churchwide Assembly of the ELCA held in Milwaukee, WI. At this Assembly, the ELCA once again committed itself to faithfully following the Way that Christ frees and empowers us to walk, which is expressed in outreach, evangelism, education, compassion and the pursuit of justice. There were many important actions that were taken, which I will report to you in the weeks ahead. However, I wish to speak about one Assembly action which has received considerable media attention in the last few days and, in some cases, the reports have been false and confusing.

The Assembly voted to declare the ELCA to be a “sanctuary denomination”. This action was part of a larger resolution that reaffirmed the long-standing commitment of the Lutheran Church to welcoming and caring for immigrants and migrants, which we have been doing for 75 years through Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service.

The word “sanctuary”, however, is a word that is broadly used in a variety of ways and for that reason I want to give you some basic clarifications about the intent and meaning of this resolution.

- 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 declared that, when we preach on Sunday that Jesus tells us to welcome and care for everyone around us, then on Monday we will use our hands and voices to make sure it happens.
- Right now, our immigration system is broken, chaotic and in need of repair. While we may have many different ideas about how to fix this broken system, we are also called to love our neighbors, particularly those who are most vulnerable to the brokenness of this system, especially families and unaccompanied youth.
- **The Churchwide Assembly’s declaration that the ELCA is a sanctuary denomination binds only the ELCA Churchwide Organization; it does not bind or obligate congregations, synods, or other organizations to be a sanctuary place.**

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The mission of the Southwestern Washington Synod is to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ by empowering congregations and Church leaders to grow in worship, education, outreach, stewardship and other ministries.

- **The Churchwide Assembly did not call for any illegal actions. All actions mentioned by the Churchwide Assembly are legal.** If any person or organization chooses to go beyond these actions and engage in civil disobedience (and therefore accept the consequences), that would be their choice. In any case, a congregation or synod that considers becoming a sanctuary organization should first consult with legal counsel.
- 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.
- While we don't yet know the full scope of the work that this declaration will open for the ELCA, we do know that many ELCA faith communities are already doing sanctuary work. For a congregation, Sanctuary could include any of the following:
 - Form a book study using, for example, *They are Us: Lutherans & Immigration* by Bouman and Deffenbaug, or another book of your choosing. Hold Sunday adult forum conversations or a series of evening discussions and consider inviting people from a number of different perspectives on this topic.
 - Study the ELCA Social Teaching Statement on Immigration <https://www.elca.org/en/Faith/Faith-and-Society/Social-Messages/Immigration>
 - Invite members of a congregation to meet with nearby organizations that work in the area of refugee resettlement or immigration issues, such as Lutheran Immigration & Refugee Services.
 - Seek out elected officials to meet with and discuss this subject.
 - Host English as a Second Language (ESL) classes.
 - Pray regularly for immigrants and also for ICE and Border Patrol agents.
 - Welcome all people to your congregation's worship and events without classifying them according to their immigration or citizenship status.
 - Invite members of your congregation to advocate for immigration reform by writing to congress.
 - Providing housing for a community member who is in the midst of legal hearings and facing deportation.

Providing sanctuary has many different meanings. I am sure that within our Southwestern Washington Synod, we will have many different reactions to the topic of sanctuary, depending on what definition we give it. Note: If you would like a more in-depth legal analysis of the topic of sanctuary, here is a link to a legal brief written by the ACLU:

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/03xu321czvmhntf/Sanctuary%20FAQ%204%2013%202017.pdf?dl=0>

Once again I wish to state that the Churchwide Assembly's decision to make the ELCA a Sanctuary Denomination does NOT compel or obligate a congregation to do the same. However, this action gives us the opportunity to dialogue with each other about how our congregations and church body can help the United States fulfill God's desire for justice for all, including citizens, immigrants and refugees.

I welcome your thoughts, reactions and suggestions.



Bishop Rick Jaech