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Study guide

A welcome respite

LIRS program extends hospitality to asylum-seekers

By Robert C. Blezard

Often risking life and limb to come to the United States for safety and a new life, asylum-seeking families arrive only to find that their long hard journey is not yet over. As they work through governmental bureaucracy, families need tangible support and legal aid. Fortunately, some asylum-seeking families coming from South and Central America are finding that help among Lutherans.

Exercise 1: Your immigrant story

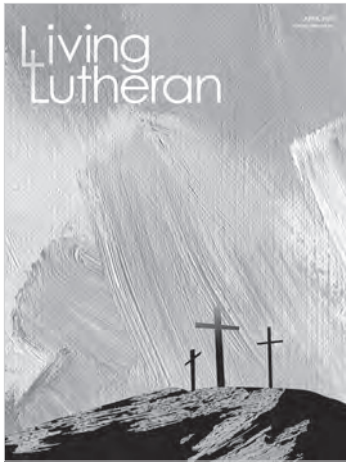
Except for the Native Americans among us, we all can point to forebears who came from somewhere else, either as immigrants, asylum-seekers or refugees, and many of them have a story of hardship. (For instance, Ireland's Great Famine of 1845-49, which led to the death of up to 1 million people, brought hundreds of thousands of economic refugees to North America. After the devastation of World War II, thousands of Europeans came to America for a better life.) What's your family story?

- From what country did your ancestors come, and when? Where did they arrive?
- What caused them to come to the United States?
- What was their vision for "a better life" in America?
- Did they speak English? Did they have any money? Did they have any family or friends in America?
- What hardships did they face? How did they overcome the hardships?
- Describe how they assimilated and put down roots.
- Did they find their "better life" in America?
- What impact has their story made in your life?

Exercise 2: LIRS helps refugees

The work of Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS) in helping asylum-seekers and refugees from South and Central American continues the mission it has carried out since 1939, when it began assisting more than 30,000 Europeans displaced by World War II. In its 80-plus years, LIRS has helped more than 100,000 displaced people to settle here (source is lirs.org), including:

- Hungarians fleeing Soviet communism in 1956.
- Cubans fleeing Fidel Castro's regime in 1959.



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Study guide: **A welcome respite** *continued*

- Ugandans expelled by dictator Idi Amin in 1972.
- Southeast Asians fleeing Vietnam and other countries after the war in 1975.
- Albanians fleeing persecution in the Balkans in the 1990s.
- Sudanese, Burmese, Tibetan, Iraqi, Hmong and others, in the 2000s.

Discuss:

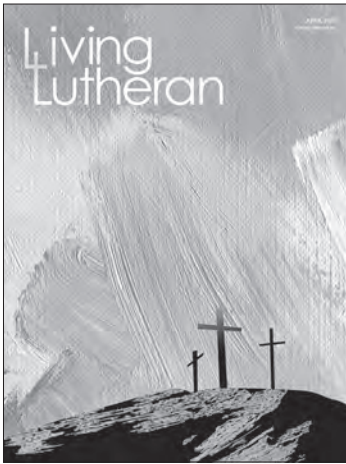
- What do you remember from the news of the day about the countries and immigrants listed above?
- Considering the refugees and immigrants from Tibet, Sudan, Kosovo, Southeast Asia and all the way back to post-WWII Europe, what do their stories have in common?
- What would their vision of “a better life” be? Is it any different from that of your forebears who first came to America?
- Are the ones settled in the past by LIRS any different from those of families crossing our southern border to escape gangs, criminals, drugs, poverty and oppression?
- As a Lutheran, how do you feel about LIRS’ record of helping others?
- Has your congregation or synod been involved with or assisted in the work of LIRS? How, or why not?

For action: Study the work of LIRS and draft a proposal for how your congregation can help in its mission. Present it to your pastor and congregation council for action.

Exercise 3: Concern for the powerless

The Bible is clear that God holds a special concern for vulnerable people, including the foreigner in the midst of God’s people. Echoing Old Testament teachings, Jesus teaches that helping the “stranger” is a sign of faithful living, and even a criterion for eternal life! Read Matthew 25:31-46 and discuss:

- Who and what is the “stranger” to which Jesus refers repeatedly in this passage?
- With what other vulnerable people is the “stranger” associated? What do they have in common? Why does Jesus group them together?
- How does Jesus want or expect God’s people to treat these vulnerable people? Why?
- Looking at verses 45 and 46, what are the consequences of failing to treat vulnerable people, including the stranger, as God wants?
- What did it mean to “welcome” the stranger in Jesus’ day? What does it mean to us today?
- Through the Welcome and Respite program, how, specifically, are Lutheran social service agencies helping to fulfill Jesus’ instruction?



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- Do our governmental policies and social attitudes toward asylum-seekers, refugees and immigrants reflect our core values as Christians? How or how not? What would have to change to bring them into alignment? How can Christians work to achieve such alignment?

Exercise 4: "The golden rule"

Jesus taught: "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets" (Matthew 7:12). In saying "this is the law and the prophets," Jesus means that the so-called "golden rule" expresses the very essence of Old Testament teaching.

- As an expression of "the law and the prophets," what is the importance of "the golden rule" for us today in our walk as children of God and followers of Jesus?
- Looking at Jesus' teaching, how broadly do you think Jesus calls us to apply "the golden rule" in our lives? Our church? Our community? Our world?
- Who does Jesus mean by "others"? How do we pick and choose the others to whom we should apply this teaching? Explain and explore.
- If you were a legal asylum-seeker arriving to the United States from the southern border, how would you want to be treated? How does that differ from how asylum-seekers are treated now?
- Do our governmental policies and social attitudes toward asylum-seekers, refugees and immigrants reflect our core values as Christians? How or how not? What would have to change to bring them into alignment? How can Christians work to achieve such alignment?

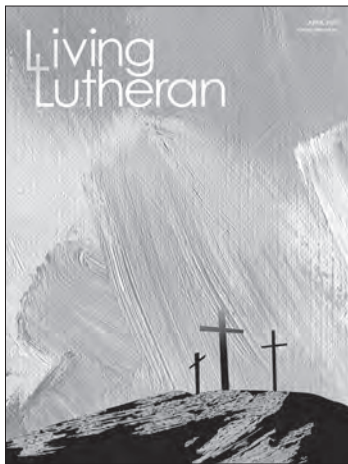
Exercise 5: Statue of Liberty

Perhaps no American image instills as much emotion and power as the Statue of Liberty. Since 1886 millions of immigrants sailing into New York Harbor have seen it and found hope for freedom and a new life. "Lady Liberty" still inspires Americans today. As part of the effort to raise money for the statue pedestal, Emma Lazarus wrote a poem, "The New Colossus," in 1883. Three decades later, in 1903, her poem was inscribed on a plaque and mounted on the pedestal. It reads in part:

Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!

Discuss:

- What vision of America's attitude toward immigrants, asylum-seekers and refugees was expressed in the "The New Colossus" even before the Statue of Liberty was installed in New York Harbor?
- Thirty years after the poem was written, "The New Colossus" was inscribed on a plaque on the pedestal's base. What does that say about the poem's message about newcomers to America?



Study guide: **A welcome respite** *continued*

- What immigrant groups made up the “tired,” the “poor,” those “yearning to breathe free” in the late 19th century? Who are those people in the early 21st century? What do they have in common?
- Does the poem reflect today’s attitudes and policies toward refugees, asylum-seekers and immigrants? Why or why not?
- Is America still as welcoming a place for refugees, asylum-seekers and immigrants? Why or why not? What has changed?
- What can the Statue of Liberty and “The New Colossus” teach us about welcoming the stranger?

Exercise 6: Asylum-seekers

Although they are often confused with “illegal aliens,” asylum-seekers are not here illegally. United States law and international treaties give everyone the legal right to seek asylum simply by showing up at any port or crossing the border and peacefully presenting themselves to an appropriate government official. From there, asylum-seekers begin a legal process that may include detention up to 20 days for families, but longer for adults. (The U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency has more than 40,000 people in detention.) The LIRS’ Welcome and Respite program helps families released from detention to connect to longer-term support and services while they go through legal processes. Discuss:

- Can you explain the difference between an illegal alien and a legal asylum-seeker? Why is the distinction important? What rights do U.S. law and international treaties give asylum-seekers?
- If asylum-seekers are not committing a crime by entering the United States, should they be treated as criminals through involuntary detention in prison-like facilities? Why or why not?
- Are detention centers a good place for families and children? Why or why not?
- Until stopped by court order, our government separated parents and children when they crossed the border. For what reasons should children be kept with their parents? Would you object to separation if it was your own family?
- Do our governmental policies and social attitudes toward asylum-seekers, refugees and immigrants reflect our core values as Christians? How or how not? What would have to change to bring them into alignment?

For action

If you, your congregation or your synod want to help asylum-seekers, refugees and immigrants, here are some ways:

- **Pray.** Ask God to help all who are struggling with poverty, violence, oppression and war, especially families and children who are displaced. Ask God to give God’s people wisdom, strength, courage, resources—and will—to help them. Ask God to show you and your congregation how to be leaders.

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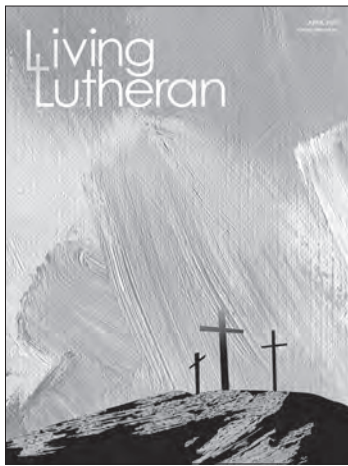
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- **Give.** Support with your financial contributions and prayers the ministry of LIRS (lirs.org), which has been doing God's work for more than 80 years.
- **Become informed.** Follow updates and messages from LIRS and Lutheran social service organizations. Stay tuned to news reports from a variety of sources to give yourself a well-rounded picture of what's going on.
- **Educate.** There is a lot of misinformation and falsehoods about asylum-seekers, refugees and immigrants going around on the internet and social media. You and your congregation can be truth-tellers and educators through temple talks, articles and conversation.
- **Join AMMPARO**, the ELCA's strategy of "Accompanying Migrant Minors with Protection, Advocacy, Representation and Opportunity." The name AMMPARO correlates with the Spanish word, "*amparo*," which means the protection of a living creature from suffering or damage. This initiative focuses on the children who arrive in our country without their parents (elca.org/AMMPARO).
- **Get involved locally.** Many communities and regions have groups that provide legal, financial and tangible assistance to asylum-seekers, refugees and immigrants. Connect with them and help out with support, volunteering and finances.
- **Advocate for policy changes.** LIRS has an advocacy office (lirs.org/advocate) dedicated to these issues, as do many other ministries that serve immigrants. ELCA Advocacy (elca.org/advocacy) frequently delves into issues of concern to immigrants, as do our ELCA state advocacy offices.

All of these are great ideas. Why not form a task force for your congregation to come up with a plan on how to get involved? Then present it to your congregation council or pastor for consideration.

A welcome respite

LIRS program extends hospitality to asylum-seekers

By Rachel K. Hindery

By the time asylum-seekers reach the Welcome and Respite center in Phoenix, they've migrated hundreds or thousands of miles to safety. The majority come from Central America, with a growing number from Africa, reports Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS), which funds the program.

Many are families seeking refuge in the United States from poverty, gang violence or other forms of persecution, said Basel Moussly, LIRS program manager for migrant services.

They arrive at the center after days in detention—up to 20 for families and more for adults or families awaiting sponsors. Next, they face another journey: to join family or sponsors as they wait for their asylum hearing.

Connie Phillips, president and CEO of Lutheran Social Services of the Southwest (LSS-SW), has witnessed their fatigue firsthand: “They’re holding on to their children—dazed—in tattered clothes, shuffling because authorities removed their shoelaces in detention.”

Then families learn that LSS-SW volunteers are there to help.

“There would be this sigh, and then smiles,” Phillips said, adding that this moment is emotional for the volunteers too. In this liminal space, the families receive shelter and compassionate care before traveling onward.

How it works

According to LIRS, the Welcome and Respite program served more than 9,900 people between its inception, in January 2019, and fall 2019. The program—which operates in Phoenix through LSS-SW and had a site in Albuquerque, N.M., via Lutheran Family Services Rocky Mountains (LFSRM)—primarily serves recently released families in the Southwest.

Upon release from detention, these families may opt to receive transportation to a bus station, leave the detention facility on their own or visit a site managed by volunteers, such as the Welcome and Respite center in Phoenix.

At that center, families receive food, clothing, hygiene kits and toys for the children. Staff offer



Photos: Rebecca Loggia

A mother and her sons (names withheld)—who came to the United States seeking refuge from gang violence and extortion in Honduras—wait for a meal while staying at the Welcome and Respite center in Phoenix. Managed by Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, the center offers asylum-seeking families short-term shelter and social support upon release from detention.

them assistance with transportation, such as bus tickets, and, if needed, a letter in English to explain their situation to others. Families also access medical screenings from the 100 Angels Foundation, a nonprofit partner of LIRS and LSS-SW.

Krish O'Mara Vignarajah, president and CEO of LIRS, stressed that Welcome and Respite gives asylum-seeking families life-giving hospitality.

“I can't imagine the fear that the recipients of our [program] experience—being tossed out of a detention center at all hours with nowhere to stay, no means of transportation, no one to turn to, nothing to eat or drink and no idea where to go,” she said. “We're simply treating them like a human being deserves to be treated—with dignity, respect and compassion.”

How it began

Moussly said the Trump administration's zero-tolerance policy, which began in April 2018 and



A boy (name withheld) sleeps at the Welcome and Respite center before traveling to live with his sponsor family in the United States.

resulted in family separations, was the catalyst for Welcome and Respite.

Between 2017 and 2018, LIRS reported an increase in the number of families apprehended at the southwestern part of the U.S.-Mexican border. In June 2018, the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of California ruled against family separations, and LSS-SW began working with LIRS to create reunification centers. LIRS reported that, in cities such as Phoenix, hundreds of people were released each day.

Phillips said a Phoenix hotel found space for some of the families, serving between 100 and 150 people daily in 2018, before Welcome and Respite officially began.

ELCA Grand Canyon Synod and Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod congregations partnered to help asylum-seekers meet their basic needs. “The congregations showed up three times per day with donated food. They sprang into action,” Phillips said. “Some of our Spanish-speaking pastors provided spiritual support.”

Eventually, three full-time staff oversaw reunification efforts, and between December 2018 and mid-June 2019, LSS-SW recruited 36 congregations to collaborate with Latino churches that were already doing the work, Phillips said.

LFSRM got involved with Welcome and Respite in March 2019, helping transport families from detention centers to the Welcome and Respite center in El Paso. That center closed after June 2019 due to shifting challenges.

Changing needs

After staying at a Welcome and Respite center for approximately two days, families move to

their next destination with family or sponsors, Moussly said.

To help families awaiting asylum hearings, LIRS provides a case-management program in Houston, New York City, Denver and Seattle, assisting with school enrollment for children and access to legal aid.

Vignarajah said the Migrant Protection Protocols, also called Remain in Mexico, coupled with stricter asylum limits, are changing needs.

“There are fewer migrants in detention because fewer migrants are even able to make it to the United States—more than 56,000 asylum-seekers are stuck in dangerous Mexican border towns awaiting their day in court,” she said. “As of Dec. 14, 2019, there were 43,327 people in ICE detention, and that number doesn’t include unaccompanied minors.”

Phillips said the need “has shifted to south of the border.”

People can help through “monetary donations and advocating for migrants to legislators,” Moussly said.

And, as it has done since 1939, LIRS will evolve programming to meet new demands. “We try to be adaptable,” Phillips said, “because we don’t know what’s next.” †

For more information, visit lirs.org. To download a study guide for this article, go to the “Spiritual practices & resources” tab at livinglutheran.org.



Rachel K. Hindery is a freelance reporter and a member of Grace Lutheran Church in River Forest, Ill.