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Sacred hospitality: What does it mean to be a sanctuary denomination?

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Living Lutheran,
May 2020

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Study guide

Sacred hospitality

By Robert C. Blezard

“Sanctuary” means different things to different people. Perhaps that is a strength that can be brought to the ELCA’s self-designation as a “sanctuary church.” Individuals, congregations and synods are able to determine for themselves how best to live as a “sanctuary church” in ways that fit their context, mission, values and self-understanding of the gospel’s messages. How will you and your congregation respond?

Exercise 1: What is sanctuary

A section of your church is the “sanctuary.” A nature preserve might be called a “wildlife sanctuary.” You might refer to your home as your “personal sanctuary.” What other common uses for the term “sanctuary” can you think of?

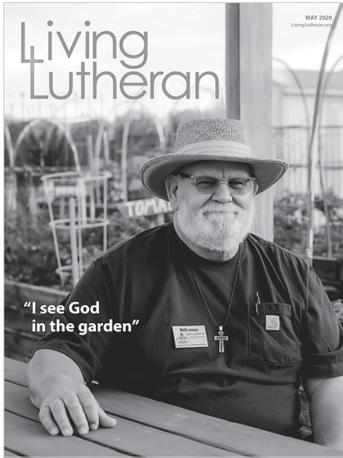
Keeping in mind the different uses for “sanctuary,” make a list of all the words your study group can think of associated with the term “sanctuary.” When done, discuss:

- What is common to all the words?
- Which words go best together?
- What distinct themes emerge?
- Working together, form your own definition of “sanctuary” as it might apply to your church.

Exercise 2: Your church “sanctuary”

Building on your study group’s work on the previous question, discuss:

- What words associated with “sanctuary” ideally apply to every Christian congregation?
- How does every congregation, in the course of its mission, seek to provide “sanctuary” to God’s people?
- From what worldly problems does every congregation provide “sanctuary” to its members?
- Describe how your congregation is a “sanctuary” to you.
- In what outreach and social service ministries does your congregation participate? In what ways are those ministries providing “sanctuary” to their recipients?
- Is a congregation fulfilling its mission if it is not in some ways a “sanctuary” to its members? Why or why not?



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Exercise 3: Immigration in your context

The United States has been called a nation of immigrants for a reason. The U.S. Census Bureau reports that our nation's 6.79 million American Indians and Native Alaskans are only about 2% of the population, so that means 98% came from somewhere else.

- What is your family's "immigration story"?
- Many immigrants who came to our shores, even those from Europe, faced prejudice, challenges and oppression, not only from those already here but also through unjust laws and policies. What challenges or hardships did your forebears face?
- How did churches support, accompany or advocate for your forebears in order for them to have an easier time adjusting to life? How might they have done better?
- How different from your forebears' experience are the political and social conditions facing immigrants today? What are the similarities? The differences?
- Who are the immigrants in your community, county or region, and what challenges do they face? How can you see their struggles through the experiences of your forebears?
- How is your congregation (or how can it be) a "sanctuary" to your immigrant neighbors? Why is this an important ministry?

Exercise 4: Sanctuary declaration

Few recent ELCA decisions have resulted in as much confusion and division as the 2019 Churchwide Assembly vote to declare the ELCA a "sanctuary church body" with regard to immigration. The decision has been the subject of much misunderstanding and misinformation. It's worth reviewing how and why the vote came about, what the resolution states and what it means. (See also the ELCA's resources at elca.org/sanctuarychurch.)

How it came about: In our denomination, a churchwide assembly, which gathers every three years, is the highest governing body. Consisting of voting members from all 65 synods, a churchwide assembly takes up memorials brought to it by various church stakeholders, including synods. Matters that are approved by a churchwide assembly are considered policy for the ELCA.

The 2019 Churchwide Assembly vote to declare the ELCA a "sanctuary church body" came from a memorial brought forward by the Metropolitan New York Synod. Following standard procedure, the memorial was channeled through the ELCA Memorials Committee and brought to the assembly, where it was amended and voted on. The memorial on sanctuary, officially titled "Churchwide Action CA19.03.11," was approved by majority vote.

- Do you understand how our denomination is structured as a church with three interrelated expressions—congregations, synods and churchwide organization?



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- Policy matters, such as the sanctuary declaration, often come from the “bottom up,” with congregations and conferences bringing matters to their synod assemblies, and those assemblies bringing them to a churchwide assembly. What do you think about this process?
- Majority votes, not unanimous votes, are required to approve matters before a churchwide assembly. As a result, how is it possible that a memorial may gain churchwide assembly approval and still have significant opposition?
- How and why is it almost guaranteed that a “majority vote” process will result in unhappy people?
- As God’s people, what steps do we take and what tools do we have constructively to deal with differences of opinion? How might those tools be used in the case of the sanctuary designation?

What does it say? Here is the actual wording of CA19.03.11:

“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

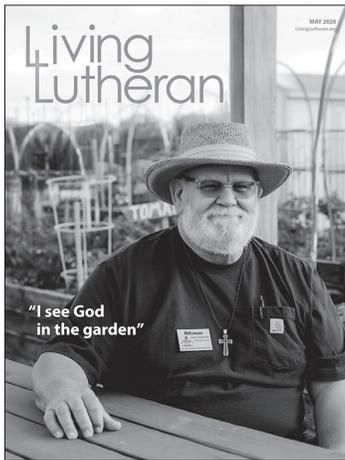
“To request that appropriate staff on the AMMPARO team, LIRS, and the Domestic Mission, Global Mission, and Mission Advancement units review the existing strategies and practices by the five current sanctuary synods and develop a plan for additional tools that provide for education and discernment around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

“To declare the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America 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.”

What does it mean? Interpretation of the memorial has proven the most controversial matter. Examining closely the wording of the memorial, discuss:

- How, specifically, does the memorial define “sanctuary church body”?
- What specific actions does the memorial ask of members, congregations and synods? (Look for the “verbs”—the action words.)
- What does the memorial say about the opinions that individual ELCA members, congregations and synods are required to hold about issues of immigration?



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- What repercussions does the memorial recommend for individuals, congregations or synods that do not support or believe in our denomination's work in areas of immigration? What repercussions are recommended for those who actually are vocal and active in opposing them?
- What does the memorial require that ELCA members, congregations and synods do in response to the issues of immigration?
- What illegal actions, including civil disobedience or defiance of law, are recommended by the memorial?
- What repercussions does the memorial recommend for individuals, congregations or synods that fail to support or participate in the ELCA's work on immigration? What repercussions are recommended for those who actually work to oppose them?
- What does the memorial say about what it means to be a sanctuary church body for congregations, synods and the churchwide organization?

Concluding discussion:

- What had you heard about the ELCA's designation as a "sanctuary church body"? From where?
- Before this exercise, what was your understanding of what it meant for the ELCA to be a "sanctuary church body"? From where did you hear it?
- Before this exercise, were you basically in favor of or opposed to the sanctuary designation? Why?
- What did you learn from reading closely the actual memorial?
- Did your opinion of the sanctuary designation change at all as a result of looking at it closely?
- What does it mean to you to be opposed to the sanctuary designation?
- What does it mean to you to be in favor of the sanctuary designation?
- Do we as a church have to be of one mind on this issue? Why or why not?

Exercise 5: Social message on immigration

The ELCA's declaration as a "sanctuary church body" builds on a long history of working with immigration issues. Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service has been serving our immigrant neighbors for 80 years. More recently, the 2016 Churchwide Assembly responded to a crisis of children and youth arriving across the border by approving a strategy called AMMPARO (Accompanying Migrant Minors with Protection, Advocacy, Representation and Opportunities). Our church's official posture is expressed in the social message on immigration approved by the ELCA Church Council in 1998 and updated in 2018. The statement is fertile soil for consideration and analysis; the excerpts below are good discussion starters:

- "Too often we are slow in, tire of, or even resist fostering a hospitable

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environment for newcomers. Too often we perpetuate the racism, the fear of, and the animosity toward newcomers that show themselves in our society.

- “When leaders in our society promote negative stereotypes of newcomers or make them a ‘scapegoat’ for social or economic ills in times of anxiety, are we appalled? We would have been if we heard our own ethnic groups degraded when they first arrived?”
- “People fleeing dangerous situations in their countries arrive daily in the United States. These asylum-seekers lack legal status for entering the country. To receive an opportunity to seek a grant of asylum (a legal protective status), they must prove a ‘credible fear of persecution.’ Because of the difficulty in proving this fear, many asylum-seekers are detained while their case is being processed. Thousands of persons, including children and women, are in detention, most of whom are indigent; they are often isolated from pastoral and legal services and subject to abuse and neglect.”
- “Newcomers without legal documents also are among the most vulnerable. Congregations are called to welcome all people, regardless of their legal status.”
- “The newcomers in our church from around the world remind us that all of us in the Church of Jesus Christ are sojourners, ‘for here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come’ (Hebrews 13:14).”

Exercise 6: God’s concern for “the alien”

The Bible makes it very clear that God considers “the alien” a protected class, along with widows and orphans. Explore the issue with the help of a Bible concordance or study tool (online or written). Look up references to “alien” or “foreigner.” (Be sure to consider these: Exodus 22:21-24, Exodus 23:9, Leviticus 19:33-34, Leviticus 23:22, Deuteronomy 24:17-22, Jeremiah 7:3-6, Jeremiah 22:3, Zechariah 7:8-10, Matthew 25:31-46). Discuss:

- In general, how are God’s people commanded to treat aliens? What specific provisions are demanded?
- What kind of legal provisions does God demand for foreigners?
- In what ways are aliens particularly vulnerable to oppression or mistreatment?
- Why does God, through Scripture, single out foreigners as a protected class?
- Looking at the United States today, how are aliens mistreated or oppressed in our culture and by our public policies?
- Given the Bible’s teachings on how God’s people are to treat aliens, what should the church’s response be to issues of immigration?
- How do the Bible’s teachings continue to inform Christians in the current immigration debate?
- How might the witness of Scripture lend support to action under the sanctuary designation?

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Exercise 7: Become a “sanctuary”

Here are some ideas of how your congregation can live into being a “sanctuary”:

- **Pray.** Ask God to help all people who are struggling with poverty, violence, oppression and war, especially families and children who cross our borders in search of a better life. Pray that those who are involved in our nation's immigration system may be treated well, find legal assistance and fairness. 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.
- **Give.** Support with your financial contributions and prayers the good work of Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (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 about what is happening in the area of immigration and immigration law. Stay tuned to news reports from a variety of sources to give you a well-rounded picture of what's going on.
- **Educate.** There is a lot of misinformation and falsehoods about immigration and immigration law going around 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 ministry “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 both documented and undocumented 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 what it means for your congregation to be a “sanctuary”? Then present it to your congregation council or pastor for consideration.

Sacred hospitality

What does it mean to be a sanctuary denomination?

By Stephanie N. Grimoldby



On Aug. 7, 2019, ELCA Churchwide Assembly attendees and community members participated in the AMMPARO walk and prayer vigil in support of migrant families. The assembly adopted a memorial declaring the ELCA a sanctuary church body.



Photo: Janine Truppay

For more than 13 years, Miriam Vargas has lived in Columbus, Ohio. While there, she had two children, held a job, paid taxes—and has been an undocumented immigrant.

Vargas and her sister escaped Honduras after their family was threatened by gangs, and at the border she received a six-month visa permitting her to enter the United States.

But as a young woman who didn't know the language or customs of a new country, she didn't receive the paperwork telling her about her court date when it was sent four years later, because she no longer lived at the address to which it was mailed.

During the Obama administration, Vargas was repeatedly granted extensions to stay in the country by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). But in May 2018 she was told, "You have 30 days—buy your tickets, you have to leave," said Sally Padgett, pastor of First English Lutheran Church in Columbus.

Yet Vargas—who has a 10-year-old daughter and a 6-year-old daughter with severe autism, both of whom are U.S. citizens—knew she couldn't do that.

Vargas, Padgett said, shared with her that "she was told, 'You either take your girls [back to Honduras],' which is the most dangerous country in the world right now, 'or you leave them here for adoption.'

"And that, to me, is heartbreaking, as a mother."

When Padgett heard of Vargas' situation, she asked her congregation if they would become a sanctuary hosting site for Vargas. After the congregation took an affirmative vote, Vargas and her two daughters moved into the church building in June 2018.

Today, First English continues to house and support Vargas and her daughters as she works to become a legal citizen. Such hospitality is an expression of the congregation's faith, affirmed by the wider church.

Last August, the 2019 Churchwide Assembly voted 718-191 to declare the ELCA a sanctuary denomination. The declaration builds on the church's commitment to accompany migrant children and families through its AMMPARO strategy, which was approved by the 2016 Churchwide Assembly. (AMMPARO stands for Accompanying Migrant Minors with Protection, Advocacy, Representation and Opportunities.)

The 2019 vote both brought the denomination increased media attention and raised questions within the ELCA about what it means to be a sanctuary church body.

For some congregations, such as First English, the sanctuary denomination vote affirmed the work they had already been doing to serve their immigrant neighbors. For others, it was a call to action and

an awakening to the plight many undocumented immigrants face.

Some ELCA members are still seeking to understand what they can or should do following the vote, wondering where their congregations fit under this denominational declaration.

“You really have to define sanctuary in your context and what it means to accompany people,” said Christopher Vergara of St. Peter Lutheran Church in New York City, who put forward the amendment to declare the ELCA a sanctuary church body. “We have to figure that out as the ELCA, as synods, as congregations and as individuals.”

What is sanctuary?

In her role as AMMPARO program director, Mary Campbell advises ELCA members and communities engaged in sanctuary and AMMPARO ministry. The ELCA has said a “sanctuary denomination” is a church body that walks alongside immigrants, refugees and asylum-seekers as a matter of faith, she clarified.

For seven ELCA “hosting” congregations, she said, that has meant providing physical shelter for an undocumented immigrant. Some congregations, such as First English, are housing undocumented immigrants indefinitely; others provide housing for 24 or 48 hours during an ICE raid because they also house schools or lack showers or other features necessary for long-term sanctuary.

For 40 additional sanctuary congregations connected to the AMMPARO network, Campbell added, responding to the church’s call to be sanctuary has meant accompanying undocumented immigrants in other ways.

“My congregation decided to declare itself a sanctuary congregation ... because we have a large immigrant population, largely Hispanic, where 75% of the people are undocumented,” said Vergara, who is St. Peter’s council president. “We grew to understand the issues and the needs of undocumented people in our community.”

As a historic church in Manhattan, St. Peter lacks showers and is unable to house overnight guests. “We had to discover a definition of sanctuary that wasn’t only about providing long-term housing for individuals in fear of deportation. ... It’s accompanying them with legal assistance, food, [off-site] housing, with mental health support—with all the things a church community in its truest sense can provide.”

Ron Werner Jr., an ELCA pastor and community organizer in the Oregon Synod—one of five in the ELCA to declare itself a sanctuary synod—works closely with the Interfaith Movement for Immigration Justice (IMIrJ), an organization that helps Oregon communities and people of faith

advance immigrant justice. But that rarely means housing an undocumented immigrant.

“We have had no one in [physical] sanctuary for over five years,” Werner said. “For us, it’s a broader understanding of what sanctuary is, which is sanctuary everywhere—for people to feel safe and free and whole in their lives.”

Some congregations are involved in accompaniment programs, supporting people who are afraid, Werner said. Congregants escort undocumented immigrants to court appointments and asylum proceedings and help them check in with ICE.

Other congregations host English as a Second Language classes or hold discussions on what our faith says about immigration. Others answer the call in the streets, Werner said, marching to advocate for just immigration laws.

Sanctuary can be many things, but most agree it’s not a solution to a broken immigration system. Usually, Padgett said, it’s a method of buying time to fight deportation on a legal front.

“The end game is for a just immigration system that would not seek to harm people who are trying to enter this country,” Vergara said.

Is sanctuary legal?

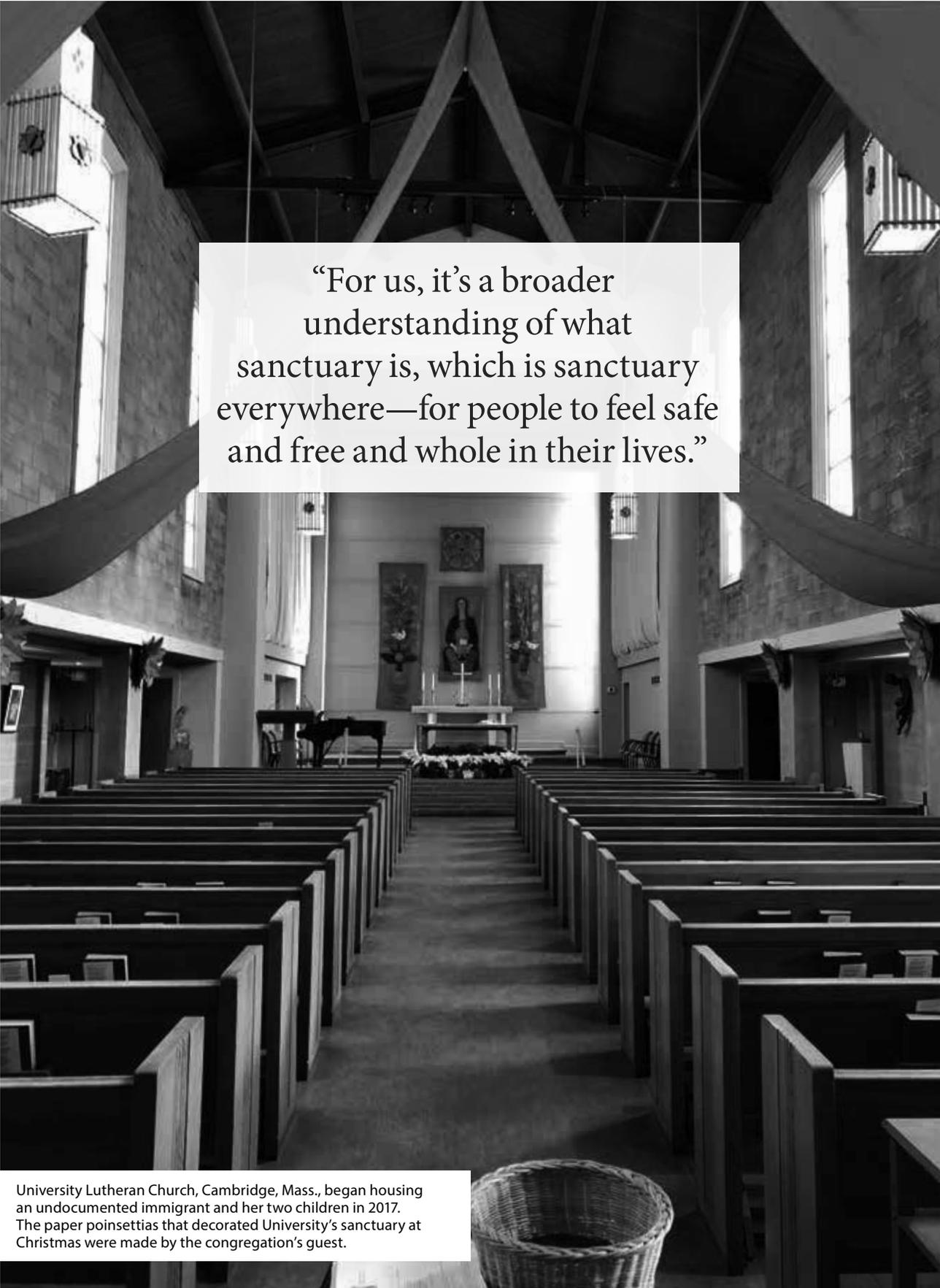
The vote to become a sanctuary denomination is not an encouragement to break the law, Vergara said.

“We are not, in any way, calling anybody to engage in illegal activity,” he added. “If you are engaging in having a long-term person staying and an ICE agent comes with a signed warrant for that person, most advocates would say you should go with that ICE agent.”

Providing sanctuary is not illegal, Campbell said. However, she noted that the American Civil Liberties Union states that congregations should be aware of what is illegal: harboring, concealing or shielding from detection an undocumented immigrant when done with knowledge or “reckless regard” for that person’s unlawful status; and transporting or moving an undocumented immigrant when that transportation helps the immigrant remain in the United States unlawfully (search for “Sanctuary Congregations and Harboring FAQ” at aclu.org).

“Almost every single hosting congregation in the ELCA is very public about the fact that they have someone in sanctuary,” Campbell said. “It’s known by the community, it’s known by immigration officials, and immigration officials know who these individuals are. ... They’re not hiding it.”

Still, Campbell said, if a congregation is considering becoming a hosting congregation, it should hire an attorney to protect itself from the myriad ways immigration laws can be interpreted.

A black and white photograph of the interior of a church sanctuary. The view is from the back of the sanctuary looking down a central aisle towards the altar. The sanctuary is filled with rows of wooden pews. The ceiling is high with exposed wooden beams. Large windows on the sides allow light to enter. At the front, there is an altar with a cross and a piano to the left. A wicker basket is visible in the foreground on the right side.

“For us, it’s a broader understanding of what sanctuary is, which is sanctuary everywhere—for people to feel safe and free and whole in their lives.”

University Lutheran Church, Cambridge, Mass., began housing an undocumented immigrant and her two children in 2017. The paper poinsettias that decorated University’s sanctuary at Christmas were made by the congregation’s guest.

Photo: Courtesy of University Lutheran

That's what University Lutheran Church—located in Cambridge, Mass., just off the Harvard University campus—did in 2017 before housing a young mother with two small girls, whom they still host today.

First, the congregation offered clear expectations for anyone seeking sanctuary within the church. “We made it a requirement that anybody who was going to come and live in our space had to have a lawyer because it was important that this person would really be on a path to permanency,” said Kathleen O’Keefe Reed, pastor of University.

Second, the congregation itself sought legal counsel, finding a firm that agreed to work pro bono.

Lodi, Calif., belong to “mixed-status” families in which someone has documentation issues, said Nelson Rabell-González, a pastor of the congregation.

Because of that reality, the congregation became a sanctuary church in 2018, supporting immigrants, aiding immigration groups and connecting members to legal and advocacy groups.

Just prior to the 2019 Churchwide Assembly, St. Paul conducted a media blitz to publicly declare itself a sanctuary congregation as a prophetic response to injustice, Rabell-González said.

“The incarceration of children [by ICE] was a turning point,” he noted. “By last summer, we had



On April 8, 2019, Interfaith Movement for Immigrant Justice Advocacy Day participants processed from St. Mark Lutheran, Salem, Ore., to the Capitol rotunda, meeting with legislators to amplify the priorities of the state’s immigrant and refugee communities.

“It turned out the kind of lawyer we needed was not an immigration specialist but a First Amendment specialist, because what we do is an expression of faith and ministry,” Reed said.

Becoming a sanctuary denomination doesn’t mean every ELCA congregation has to become a sanctuary church. But it does mean every congregation is encouraged to discuss the topic.

“What we’re basically telling congregations ... [is that] they should educate themselves about sanctuary. Learn what it is and what it isn’t,” Campbell said. “If they want to prepare themselves in case someone would show up at their door and they’re not a sanctuary congregation, they should know who in their area they could turn to, to help the person requesting assistance.”

And while not every undocumented immigrant is a political refugee, those who are have a legal right of asylum in the United States and around the world.

A “political” issue?

At least 80% of the members of St. Paul Lutheran,

already a sizable Spanish community worshipping with us. Last March, 30 kids did their first communion [with us]. ... We looked at that and said, “We have to take a stand.”

St. Paul’s immigration ministry didn’t change significantly after the assembly vote, but the legitimacy of the congregation’s work increased, he said, adding, “It gave us more inroads to the community, because we had that badge of honor. That’s why our ministry keeps growing.”

Not all ELCA members agree that the assembly vote was the correct route to take as a denomination. “My congregation has a variety of perspectives on this issue,” said Tyler Beane Kelly, pastor of Zion Lutheran Church in The Dalles, Ore.

But while they may have different ideas about how to fix the U.S. immigration system, Lutherans can agree that loving the neighbor is central to their faith.

Kelly has seen members of his congregation changed by stories of people directly affected by the

immigration system. “[Like] this father [who] has been detained for three years and he’s never met his daughter because his wife was pregnant when he was taken by ICE,” he said. “Using a real story, instead of a theory, that works better.”

Some members question why the ELCA voted on what can be considered a “political” issue. Supporters say it’s not political but a social ministry defined by Scripture.

Since the time of the early church, Christians have offered sanctuary, continuing a biblical practice in which cities and houses of worship provided refuge and asylum for people fleeing injustice.



Photo: Kathy Edge

“We are called throughout the Bible to care for the stranger,” Vergara said. “And it goes from Moses’ mother putting her baby in the Nile to [give him] a better life, and God takes care of that baby, to [stories of] being a stranger in a foreign land. It keeps coming up in the Bible, and I think people resonate with that.”

How should we respond?

The best way to figure out how your congregation can engage with sanctuary ministry is to listen to those around you, Reed said. When University considered becoming a hosting congregation, its staff spent a month conversing with members one-on-one to hear their views and concerns.

And, importantly, the congregation took time to listen to their neighbors. “You need to place yourself in a position so you can hear the stories of your immigrant neighbors,” Reed said. “Our members are from all over the country, and they go to Thanksgiving dinner ... and they hear, ‘How can you do something for these illegals?’

“To be able to respond firsthand from a personal depth of knowledge about what’s it like to be a mother or a father or an unaccompanied minor for whom getting out of where they live is a matter of life or death, it’s like growing capacity for empathy by listening.”

Those engaged in sanctuary work also recommend that congregations utilize their surroundings to help determine what their ministry around the issue could look like.

Kelly points to the Northern Oregon Regional Correctional Facilities (NORCOR), a public county jail in The Dalles that has contracted with ICE in order to help balance its budget.

“The problem is immigrants who are being detained at NORCOR are sometimes detained for two, three, four years,” Kelly said. “And the facility really can’t provide the resources that somebody in that situation would need.” It isn’t built to handle face-to-face family visitations, he said.

In May 2017, he and a group of clergy began visiting undocumented immigrants detained at NORCOR. “You get a feel for what it’s like to live without documentation in this country,” he said.

Kelly’s situation may be unique, but he noted that if he hadn’t been in contact with the IMiJ network to learn about the detainees, the ministry may not have come to fruition.

Those active in sanctuary ministry emphasize the need for congregations, wherever they’re located, to create relationships with people in their communities.

“A lot of our towns that are small and rural still have significant Latino populations that live and work there,” Kelly said. “They’re your neighbors, they’re your roofing contractors, they work in your restaurants, they farm or pick fruit, and they work in your local nonprofits and schools.

“Following the relationships was what Jesus was all about, and all the countless stories of people whom he was engaging with were on the margins. [Start] small, start in an obvious place; you don’t have to go way out of your way.” †

For more

Learn more and complete a survey about being a sanctuary denomination at elca.org/sanctuarychurch. Download a study guide at livinglutheran.org by clicking on the “Spiritual practices & resources” tab.



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