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Study guide

Room at the inn

ELCA ministries continue to open their doors to asylum-seekers

By Robert C. Blezard

Through the highly respected Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service and other ministries, Lutherans in the United States have long been in the lead when it comes to helping settle immigrants, refugees and asylum-seekers here. In May the U.S. government lifted COVID-era Title 42 restrictions that had allowed authorities to deny asylum-seekers. Since then, Lutheran ministries and their partners have increased their outreach. Can you or your congregation help?

EXERCISE 1: ASYLUM

Asylum-seekers—those who are fleeing persecution or torture in their home countries—comprise one category of people who want to come to the United States. If they are granted permission to apply for asylum, they enter the United States legally as their application is processed.

Imagine you are living in this scenario: *The political and social situation in your home country is chaotic and violent. Every hour and every day you fear for the safety of yourself and your family. Things are so bad you finally decide to leave everything you have and everyone you have ever known behind. You make the arduous journey to the U.S. border with the hope—not the guarantee—that you can be granted asylum and begin a new life in a country that is stable and free.*

- How bad would your living conditions have to get before you consider picking up your life and that of your family to move to another country?
- At what point would the pain and difficulty of remaining in your current life situation be so great that the hardships and risk of failure would be worth the gamble?
- How hard would things have to be for you to leave your home and travel on foot, possessing only what you can carry, to the border of the country you want to enter?
- What threats could persuade you to “take the plunge” and leave everything behind, perhaps knowing that once you left you could never return?
- If you were to arrive in an asylum country, how would you hope and want to be welcomed, greeted and assisted in forming your new life?

EXERCISE 2: ONE FAMILY’S STORY

They were a poor couple who wanted only to live peacefully and give their baby son a good life. But instability and danger menaced their turbulent country, and murderous thugs terrorized the innocent. Fearing the worst, they fled—leaving their homeland



Study guide: **Room at the inn** *continued*

and journeying on foot in desperate hope of finding safety, freedom and peace in a foreign country.

Another tale of woe from the U.S. southern border? No!

It's the story of Joseph, Mary and Jesus. Matthew's Gospel tells us that King Herod sent death squads to murder all boys aged 2 and under who lived in and around Bethlehem. Terrified that Jesus would be one of them, Joseph and Mary fled. Matthew 2:14 tells us that the holy family escaped to Egypt on foot under the cover of darkness. They found asylum there until it was safe to return home. Read Matthew 2:13-16 and discuss:

- Why did Mary and Joseph flee to Egypt with Jesus?
- What other choices might they have had? Why was going to Egypt the best choice?
- What would have happened if they had stayed in Bethlehem? What would that have meant for humanity?
- What might have happened if the holy family wasn't given access to Egypt?
- What might have happened if the holy family couldn't find the resources they needed to get by in Egypt?
- As a Christian, how would you have wanted the Egyptians to welcome and assist the holy family?
- What similarities are there between the holy family's story—escaping death and persecution—and that of many individuals and families seeking asylum in the United States?
- How might the holy family's story, deeply embedded in our Christian tradition, inform our own attitudes and responses?

EXERCISE 3: HUMANIZING THE STATISTICS

For those of us whose information about asylum-seekers comes mainly from news sources, it's easy to think of the immigration struggle in terms of cold statistics. But each case involves people and families with stories of suffering and longing.

"If you actually get to know one family or even a single asylum-seeker, everything becomes more dignified and filled with humanity," said Doreen Rinas, a member of Messiah Lutheran Church, Amherst, N.H., which helps refugees in its community.

- How much do you know about the issues of refugees, migrants and asylum-seekers desiring to enter the United States? Do you consider yourself uninformed, somewhat informed, informed or very informed on these issues? Explain.
- On what sources do you rely for information about immigration issues? Do these sources primarily report news or do they mainly offer opinion about the news? How might the two approaches differ in credibility?
- Have you ever read, heard or watched the story of an asylum-seeker or family seeking asylum?

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- Have you ever talked with someone who is seeking asylum? Someone who works firsthand with asylum-seekers?

For action:

- Research firsthand accounts of people who are or have been asylum-seekers.
- Locate and talk to an asylum-seeker in your area. Learn their story.
- Invite an asylum-seeker to talk to your study group or church.
- Invite someone who works with asylum-seekers to talk to your study group or church.
- Get involved in helping.

EXERCISE 4: CONCERN FOR ALIENS

Both the Old Testament and New Testament are clear that God holds a special concern for vulnerable people, including the foreigner in the midst of God's people.

Begin by looking up Leviticus 19:33-34; 23:22; 24:22, Exodus 12:49; 23:9; 22:21, Deuteronomy 10:18-19; 27:19, Psalm 146:9, Malachi 3:5, Matthew 25:35 and Hebrews 13:2. (You can find others in a Bible search tool.)

- Reading the passages, what can you say about the dangers or risks that foreigners might face from God's people?
- Why would God include foreigners in the list of people for whom special concern is needed—a list that includes widows, orphans, the very poor and daily-wage workers?
- Why would God repeatedly command God's people to treat strangers and foreigners well?
- What does God's repeated commands indicate about human nature?

Foreigners are vulnerable for many reasons. They are often separated from their main sources of support; they might not know the laws, culture or customs of the host country; they might speak a different language; they may hold a different currency; and they might be looked upon with hostility and suspicion. As a result, they are vulnerable to being exploited, tricked, oppressed or discriminated against.

- Which of these vulnerabilities are still present for foreigners in today's world?
- Do God's commands regarding the treatment of foreigners apply to Christians today? Explain.
- How do these commands shape (or should shape) our thinking about foreigners and asylum-seekers? Our actions?

EXERCISE 5: YOUR FAMILY'S STORY

The 2020 census reveals that only 2.9% of U.S. residents are registered as American Indians or Alaska Natives. This means that ancestors of 97.1% of all Americans came from somewhere else. Share (if necessary, research first, then share):

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- Where were your forebears from?
- When did they come to the United States?
- What caused them to move to the United States?
- What hardships did they overcome to get here?
- How were they welcomed? Did they face prejudice or hostility?
- How did they assimilate into American culture? How does your family remember and honor their heritage, culture and struggle?
- What similarities does your forebears' story have with those of asylum-seekers today?
- How would you have wanted your forebears to have been treated?
- How can your story inform your response and attitude toward asylum-seekers today?

EXERCISE 6: LUTHERAN HELP

Look over the article in *Living Lutheran* and note how congregations are helping asylum-seekers.

- What specific needs do asylum-seekers have when they arrive in the United States?
- What specific ways are congregations attempting to meet those needs?
- Are these congregations all in border states? Does location matter when it comes to providing assistance? Why or why not?
- What local partners have congregations found to assist them in their ministries?
- How have ELCA churchwide strategies, emphases and policies assisted congregations?
- How could your congregation help? What assets could be used to assist asylum-seekers?

EXERCISE 7: "DO UNTO OTHERS ..."

Jesus gave us the golden rule: "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 does he call 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

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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 8: STATUE OF LIBERTY

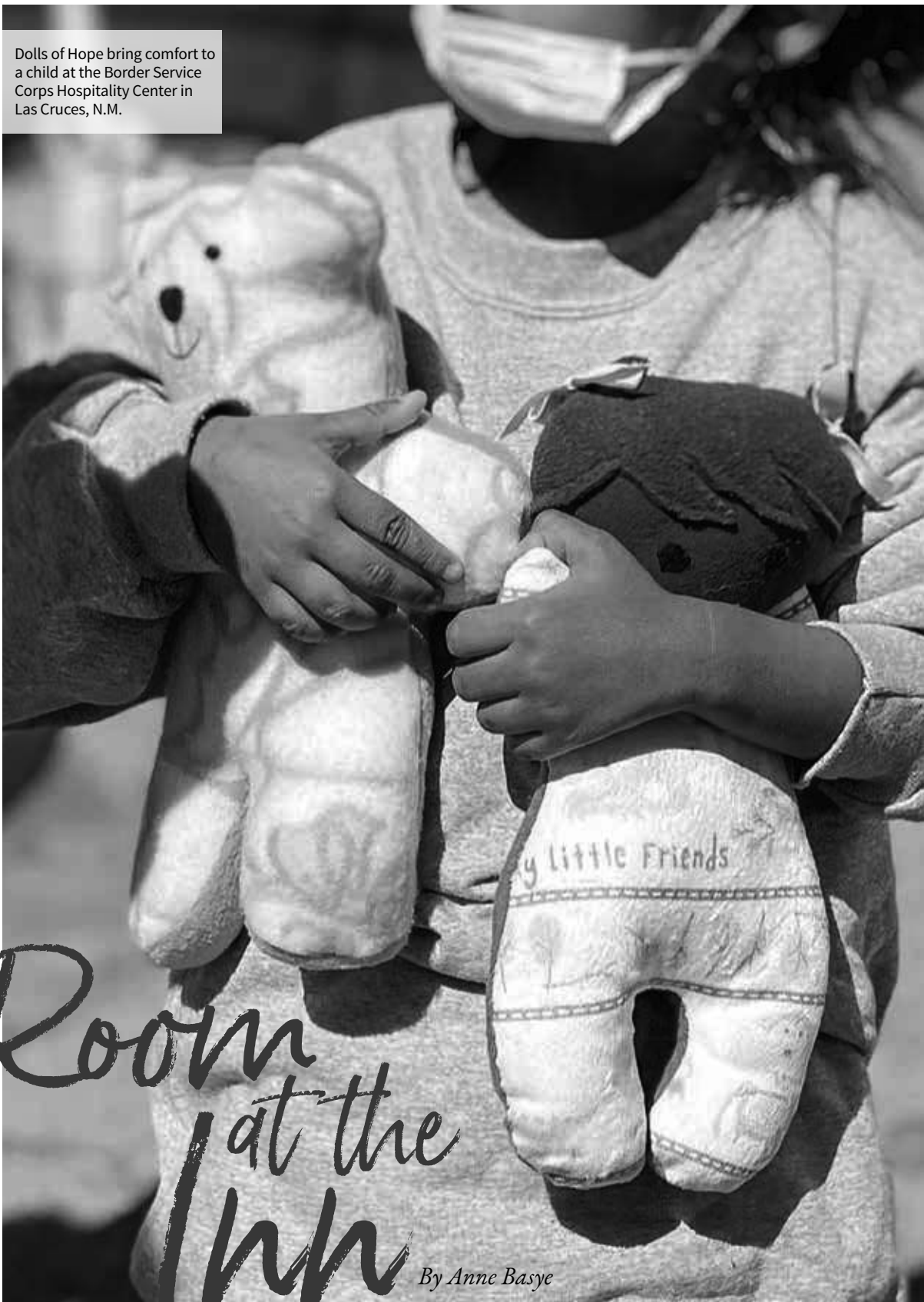
Situated on an island in New York City, the Statue of Liberty has greeted immigrants since 1886. Weary European ship passengers have seen “Lady Liberty” as a symbol of freedom and hope for a new life.

In 1903—exactly 120 years ago—Emma Lazarus’ poem, “The New Colossus,” which she wrote with the statue in mind, 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!*

- What vision of America’s attitude toward immigrants, asylum-seekers and refugees is expressed in the “The New Colossus”?
- What is the significance of the poem being inscribed on a plaque at the Statue of Liberty?
- What immigrant groups make up the “tired,” the “poor,” those “yearning to breathe free” at the turn of the 20th century? Who are those people in the 21st century? What do they have in common?
- Does the poem reflect today’s attitudes and policies toward asylum-seekers? Why or why not?
- What can the Statue of Liberty and “The New Colossus” teach us about welcoming the stranger?
- Do our government policies and social attitudes toward asylum-seekers 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?

Dolls of Hope bring comfort to a child at the Border Service Corps Hospitality Center in Las Cruces, N.M.

Photo: Courtesy of Border Servant Corps



Room at the Inn

By Anne Basye

As Title 42 ends, ELCA ministries continue to open their doors to asylum-seekers

Staff of Border Servant Corps (BSC) in Las Cruces, N.M., spent the beginning of May on the phone, looking for congregations, individuals, social service organizations—anyone to offer room at the inn after May 11, when the U.S. government would lift the Title 42 immigration restrictions imposed at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Title 42 allowed immigration authorities to expel migrants and deny entry to asylum-seekers. In May more than 50,000 people living in shelters along the U.S.-Mexico border were waiting to request asylum.

As the largest around-the-clock reception and sheltering campus for families in the El Paso Sector of U.S. Customs and Border Protection, BSC can welcome about 250 asylum-seekers a day. While Title 42 was in place, up to 2,300 asylum-seekers a month stopped at the BSC Hospitality Center for a meal, a hot shower, a change of clothes, short-term housing and assistance with travel arrangements. Lifting Title 42 was expected to bring many more.

BSC hoped to find groups that could welcome buses of 50 migrants for 48 to 72 hours, more congregations to sponsor asylum-seeking families and more funds. Founded in 1977 by Peace Lutheran Church, Las Cruces, the organization is funded primarily by a grant from the Federal Emergency Management Agency and counts on its Lutheran partners to welcome everyone who comes in its door.

Who seeks asylum?

“We are living in an unprecedented time of global displacement,” said Dan Beirne, director for mobilization and faith relations for Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS).

Of the 103 million forcibly displaced people around the world, nearly 32.5 million are refugees, according to the Office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees. Processed in refugee camps around the world, they reach their destination countries with paperwork, sponsors and benefits in place, and they can work right away.

Asylum-seekers, by contrast, must present themselves to U.S. authorities and request permission to apply for asylum. Many are turned away. If admitted to the United States, applicants must file a request within a year of entry and, to be approved, establish a credible fear of persecution or torture if they return home. While they wait, families need sponsors, because asylum-seekers don’t qualify for federal benefits such as food stamps and must spend months, even years, seeking work permits.

In April, 40% of the guests at the BSC Hospitality Center were from Venezuela. Another 42% were from Colombia, Turkey and Brazil. Half were children



Photo: Courtesy of Justin Eller

This button signifies a member of the Guardian Angels. It’s a sign to judges that the church is accompanying young migrants through prayer and presence as they attend hearings in juvenile immigration court.

traveling with their families. Many had spent as long as five years in a third country before arriving in the United States.

“The children of Venezuelan parents have birth certificates from Ecuador, Colombia or Peru,” said Kari Lenander, executive director of BSC. “Most have walked or taken ground transportation to the U.S. border.”

Migrants and asylum-seekers stepping off the bus at BSC experience their first moment in the United States out of detention. Lenander and her staff greet them with fresh water, a welcome speech in several languages and, for children, an invitation to the playground. Guests with birthdays that month get a song and a present.

“We want people to relax and breathe a little bit and honor the humanity of the folks who are coming to us,” Lenander said. Most already have sponsors and move on to their final destination in three days. Those who don’t often remain in border communities such as El Paso.

Last winter, hundreds of asylum-seekers found themselves on charter buses headed to New York City or Washington, D.C., paid for by cities and states along the border.

“We just opened the doors and began helping those who needed to be helped,” said Juan Carlos Ruiz, pastor of Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd in Brooklyn. The congregation retooled its pandemic-era food pantry and kitchen to welcome new arrivals 24 hours a day and to house those with nowhere to stay.

“For people who have been through the jungle, the need is not only for food but for human connection,” Ruiz said. Volunteers help set up calling plans to reach families at home and replace phones lost on the journey.

The congregation, he said, is serious about its “moral and spiritual obligation to take care of the more vulnerable neighbor. We are the ones who are supposed to be doing that work.”

Messiah Lutheran Church in Marquette, Mich., is sponsoring Gloria (last name withheld for privacy) and her two sons, who arrived in September 2020 and will remain until their asylum trial in



Migrants and asylum-seekers at the BSC Hospitality Center experience their first moment in the United States out of detention. At BSC, they are welcomed with fresh water, a welcome speech and, for children, an invitation to the playground. Guests with birthdays get a song and a present.

2024. Members of Messiah and of nearby Baptist, Episcopalian and Congregationalist churches are walking with the family on their way to independence by accompanying them to the Honduran embassy for passports, driving Gloria to ESL classes and advocating for services in a school district with no other Spanish speakers.

“These relationships change your heart and mind,” said Molly Eversoll, a pastor of Messiah. Matthew 25:35-40 is the congregation’s guide, she said, noting that “our ethos is loving our neighbors as ourselves, and recognizing and actually doing something with our abundance that helps the world.”

Gloria recently secured her work permit and a job at a local hotel. Her oldest son, who lost his leg on the overland journey to the U.S. border, is so comfortable with his new prosthesis that he plays sled hockey during the Upper Peninsula’s long, cold winters. “Teenage boys are teenage boys,” Eversoll said. “They wear their shorts in the snow no matter how cold it is.”

A churchwide strategy for welcome

Before welcoming Gloria and her family, Messiah became a welcoming congregation through the ELCA’s AMMPARO strategy (Accompanying Migrant Minors with Protection, Advocacy, Representation and Opportunities). AMMPARO workshops and resources introduced members of Messiah to border issues and the alphabet soup of immigration statuses.

An educational immersion trip to BSC “was huge,” Eversoll said. By the time Gloria arrived, they had a good grasp on what lay ahead.

The AMMPARO strategy began in 2016, when nearly 60,000 unaccompanied minors from Central America were apprehended on the southern border. “The influx called upon the ELCA to make a more comprehensive response to migration,” said Mary Campbell, AMMPARO program director. Adopted by that year’s churchwide assembly, the strategy seeks to address the root causes of migration in sending countries; respond to the situation with companions, affiliates and partners; and advocate for migrant children and their families.

Regarding asylum-seekers, the ELCA “unequivocally supports the right for people to be able to seek asylum from fear of persecution and violence,” said Giovana Oaxaca, AMMPARO’s program director for migration policy.

ELCA members live out that position by accompanying people in detention, voicing their concerns to policymakers and sponsoring families.



Photo: Courtesy of Messiah Lutheran Church

Members of Messiah Lutheran Church, Marquette, Mich., participate in an education immersion trip led by Border Servant Corps, which helped them prepare to welcome a family from Honduras. The congregation is sponsoring the family as they await their asylum trial in 2024.

AMMPARO has provided sponsorship training to its 223 welcoming congregations, 47 sanctuary congregations and other ELCA partners. The training helped another Messiah Lutheran Church—this one in Amherst, N.H.—prepare for a family from Ecuador.

When the mother toured the renovated church building that would be her home, she “cried tears of joy,” said member Doreen Rinas.

Messiah helped the mother find an immigration lawyer and is supporting her and her two children while she waits for a work permit. Members also transport the 4-year-old to preschool and the mother to ESL classes.

After St. Andrew Lutheran, a welcoming congregation in San Diego, turned its empty community center into housing, a family of seven from Haiti moved in for 10 months. Three years later the community building has served as transient housing for about 50 people, all from Haiti. The Pacifica Synod AMMPARO Network connects St. Andrew with nearby ELCA congregations that walk alongside the families as they enroll children in school, see doctors and lawyers, and learn English. “Together, we could do more,” said Sarah Sumner-Eisenbraun, a pastor of St. Andrew.

Gethsemane Lutheran Church in Seattle has walked alongside 27 asylum-seekers in nine households since 2018. Word gets out. “It’s something like the Underground Railroad, where people tell others that this is a place you can be safe,” said Joanne Engquist, a pastor of Gethsemane.

Accompanying migrants and asylum-seekers is a relationship, not a project, she said. “It’s going to be years and years, not months and months,” she added. “But it is absolutely transforming for our community of faith and for our sense of what God calls us to do and to be.”



Migrants get off a U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement bus. As the largest around-the-clock reception and sheltering campus for families in the El Paso Sector of U.S. Customs and Border Protection, Border Servant Corps can welcome about 250 asylum-seekers a day.

A long Lutheran welcome

One long journey ends when asylum-seekers are admitted to the United States and settle with sponsors. Then a second, more complicated journey begins. Lutherans are companions here, too, offering what LIRS calls “the Long Welcome.”

“Our work doesn’t just stop with meeting them at an airport,” Beirne said. “We want refugees and asylum-seekers not just to survive but to thrive.”

LIRS engages congregations in the Long Welcome in several ways. Through its Fresh Change initiative, congregations gather and ship new clothing to BSC and other border ministries for asylum-seekers leaving detention. The Emmaus Network equips congregations to answer the biblical call to welcome the stranger by standing and advocating alongside these new neighbors.

The network’s “one-stop shop” welcome centers help asylum-seekers figure out housing, work permits, the school system, court appearances and other steps to making a life in the United States. Some are located in congregations, such as the one opening this summer at Christ Lutheran in Baltimore, thanks to a \$450,000 gift from ELCA World Hunger. Some are operated by LIRS or an affiliate group. Other welcome centers, such as the one at Good Shepherd in Brooklyn, are independent.

“Refugees have a national system to support them, but asylum-seekers have nothing,” said Alicia Vasquez-Crede, associate director for asylum services at the LIRS Welcome Center in San Antonio.

Welcome centers bridge that gap. As clients and caseworkers assess new arrivals and make a plan with them to find a lawyer or enroll in English classes, “the idea is to work toward those goals together so, at the end of six months, they feel more empowered,” she said.

The Welcome Center at Lutheran Community Services Northwest in SeaTac, Wash., mentors teens from Afghanistan and Ukraine who entered the United States under the Humanitarian Parole program. Its attorney and legal aides also educate clients on the application process and advocate on their behalf as friends of the court.

That’s important, because courts are confusing places with a specialized language and procedure. Missing a hearing or failing to file paperwork greatly increases the odds of being deported.

The AMMPARO Guardian Angels program helps young people as they attend hearings in juvenile immigration court. “We are silent, we pray and we show the judges that vulnerable people, especially unaccompanied minors, are part of who the church is called to accompany,” said Justin Eller, assistant to the bishop for care and community, who coordinates 22 volunteers in the Southeastern Synod.



Photo: Courtesy of Border Servant Corps

Micaela de la Rose, BSC engagement and education director, presents an immersion lesson at the BSC offices.

Between 15 and 25 young people attend the morning hearings, sometimes with an adult, more often alone. The Guardian Angels are mostly silent, but if asked, they may answer a question or share information about free legal resources.

“There have always been strangers,” Eller said of his work. “This is our time to welcome them.”

A hemispheric issue

“Every country in the Western Hemisphere is looking at mass migration,” Oaxaca said, “and asking themselves, how do we respond in a way that honors our commitments and honors the people we have to protect?”

For Rinas, relationships with real people humanize global statistics. “If you actually get to know one family or even a single asylum-seeker, everything becomes more dignified and filled with humanity,” she said. “You discover it’s not just a number, but a person with feelings and good and bad experiences.”

The 500 people who come to Good Shepherd every week for food, clothing, and referrals to housing and lawyers “don’t deplete our oil jar,” Ruiz said. “The resources keep coming. Generosity is a hallmark of the resurrection, and when you work out of that frame of mind and heart, you know that God is sustaining us and providing for us, and we are just basically means of God’s agency.” †

Resources

- To read the ELCA social message “Immigration,” go to elca.org/socialmessages.
- For resources, videos and ways to get involved in AMMPARO, visit elca.org/ammparo.
- For more information on Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, visit lirs.org/refugee-resettlement.
- Learn more about the Border Servant Corps at borderservantcorps.org.
- Download a study guide for this article at livinglutheran.org by clicking on the “Spiritual practices & resources” tab.