

Greater Milwaukee Synod Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's Work. Our Hands.

A Pastoral Message on Becoming a Sanctuary Church Body

One of the more controversial decisions of last week's ELCA Churchwide Assembly, held here in Milwaukee, was the decision to "declare the ELCA a sanctuary church body." This action was part of a memorial brought forward by the Metropolitan New York Synod, and after significant debate, the action passed. This occurred on the same day as the Immigration Procession and Prayer Vigil, in which over 700 people walked from the Wisconsin Center to the local office of US Citizenship and Immigration Services and conducted a prayer vigil. (Additional information can be found here https://elca.org/News-and-Events?_ga=2.245303301.1284967576.1565788560-2101789313.1493671150).

It was, for me, a powerful day of witness and action, as we sang, prayed, and declared our common commitments to support immigrants, refugees, and asylum-seekers by means of a "9.5 Theses on Immigration" document. We received a significant amount of press coverage for the events of that day, and while I have received many positive affirmations for our work, I know that these actions are troubling and confusing for others. The topic of immigration is certainly a controversial one in today's political climate, one that seems to divide us into increasingly polarized camps, and there are those who believe that these recent actions have placed us firmly into one of these partisan camps.

As I discussed in my previous message on immigration, my deepest hope is that we can remember that our most fundamental call as followers of the risen Christ is to love our neighbors. As I wrote then, "our call as the Church is simple: we are to love our neighbors. All of them. We are to make that love concrete, risking our own security and privilege to stand with all who are in need. We are to be the Church, reminding one another that we are never alone."

That's what I believe this declaration of being a sanctuary church body is all about. Making our love of neighbor concrete and specific. Some congregations may be in a position to offer physical sanctuary to those seeking refuge from a broken and capricious system; some may be in a position to offer support to those congregations; others may only be in a position to advocate for changes in our immigration laws and policies. The action by the Churchwide Assembly does not and cannot mandate any synod or congregation to engage in any specific action; it does, however, call us to make our love of neighbor real. Additional information on Sanctuary Congregations is available from Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services at <https://www.lirs.org/united-sanctuaries-america/>.

I encourage us all to step back from the rhetoric and partial truths that populate social media and the cable news networks to ask this basic question: What does love look like? It cannot simply be an emotional or intellectual response; Jesus invites us to risk concrete, specific acts of love. My prayer is that this question will guide us all as we explore together what it means to be a church clear about our purpose in this conflicted and challenging world.

Bishop Paul Erickson