



# Immigration and Hospitality of the Heart

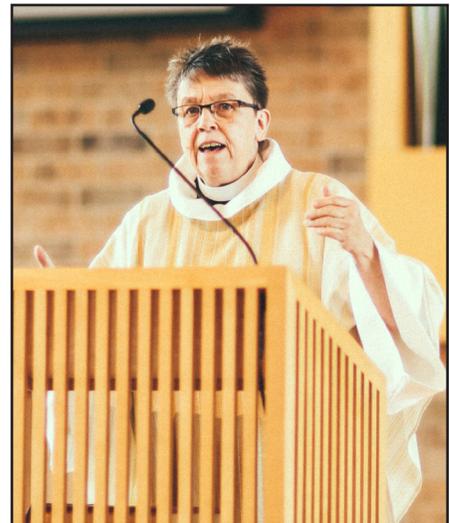
by Bishop Patricia Lull

*I started this message several weeks ago. In light of action at the recent ELCA Churchwide Assembly, declaring this church body to be a sanctuary denomination, an expanded word on what that means is included here. – Bishop Lull*

Recently, I heard a colleague speak about having a “hospitable heart.” What he meant was having a heart open to see all others with respect and to share a concern for their well-being. Let’s start with the call for us to have a “hospitable heart.” Please don’t confuse this with sentimentality and please don’t stop reading here.

In the midst of a tense conversation, Jesus said, “*Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks*” (Matthew 12:34). We are living in a time when vitriolic words and hate speech have found their way into ordinary life. Tragically, such speech causes many to simply stop talking and has caused a few to act with deadly violence toward immigrants. Instead of engaging in a civil debate, it seems easier to react with broad generalities about others, their intentions, and the very dignity of their lives.

In the Christian community we are called to do better than that. In fact, the very nature of congregational life, where we are called together by the power of the Spirit, gives us an opportunity to listen carefully and to speak respectfully with and about contemporary issues with those with whom we disagree.



## Christian commitment to outsiders

From its earliest days, the Christian community has been concerned with strangers in their midst. “*Let mutual love continue,*” writes the author of Hebrews. “*Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it*” (Hebrews 13:1-2). The responsibility to offer hospitality to foreigners and outsiders continues the clear mandate within Judaism, expressed in foundational texts like Deuteronomy 10:19: “*You shall love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.*”

In this synod, many Lutherans have a deep and personal memory of their family’s immigrant roots. Not only Germans, Swedes, Norwegians, Finns and Danes, but people from Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Mexico, Guatemala, Liberia, South Sudan, Ethiopia and other countries fill our pews and serve as pastors and deacons. We know from our own family stories the complex reasons that cause people to leave their home in one country

to move across the globe. The United Nations High Commission on Refugees estimates that more than 65 million persons are on the move today, seeking economic relief, escaping war or persecution, or displaced by famine or violence in their local community.

The Lutheran World Federation (LWF), of which the ELCA is a member, was formed following World War II when there were 60 million refugees in Europe – one in six of them a Lutheran. The global Lutheran community played a key role in resettling refugees from its founding in 1947; this role continues today with LWF's extension of humanitarian aid to migrants from South Sudan to Syria; Cameroon to Central America and elsewhere today.

In the east metro, the work of resettling and welcoming immigrants continued with many persons displaced by the Vietnam War and other unrest in Southeast Asia. As a state, we Minnesotans are well known for welcoming new populations, who contribute in many ways to a thriving economy.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is also a long-standing partner with Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services (LIRS), a national agency that assists those who have been granted visas to come to the United States. Lutheran Social Services of Minnesota and the Minnesota Council of Churches, both affiliated with this synod, continue the work of refugee resettlement today. There are a variety of ways to support such agencies with financial donations and volunteer hours.

## **Immigration issues today**

Currently, the quota for visas for those seeking refugee resettlement status is 30,000 per year. Some officials in Washington, D.C. are proposing to reduce that to zero for 2020, functionally closing the door on a significant and legal way to enter this country. As the bishop of this synod, I encourage you to write to our elected officials about closing the door to immigrants in this time of such high global need. More information is available at [www.lirs.org/defending-refugee-admissions/](http://www.lirs.org/defending-refugee-admissions/).

Several congregations in this synod have made a connection to AMMPARO (Accompanying Minor Migrants with Protection, Advocacy, Representation and Opportunities), a program of the ELCA to alleviate the conditions in Central America that cause people to migrate or to offer support to deported migrants as they await return to their home countries. Seventy individuals have been trained through the Guardian Angels program to walk with unaccompanied minors, as they navigate the legal system in this country. I encourage congregations to consider becoming Welcoming Congregations and individuals to consider being trained through the Guardian Angels program, as I have been trained, to stand with minors when they come to their immigration hearings in Bloomington. More information on AMMPARO can be found at <https://elca.org/ammparo>.

We know that there is a crisis at the southern border of this country. Thousands of individuals – many of them parents with children – have come to our border seeking asylum, as our laws provide for them to do. Shelters are overflowing and the capacity to house adults and children in a humane manner has been taxed in a way that we cannot ignore.

Some of you have asked me how you can be more directly involved in offering emergency assistance. The ELCA bishops in Texas met recently with their staffs and other resource people to create a mechanism for directing such assistance.

In the Southwestern Texas Synod, a small congregation in Eagle Pass houses dozen of asylum-seekers nightly. Two hours south of San Antonio, they are open to receiving volunteers, who can cook meals, greet guests, clean, do laundry or work on the building. If interested, contact Emma Espina at [emmaespino71@gmail.com](mailto:emmaespino71@gmail.com). Financial donations to assist this ministry – or wherever most needed at the border – can be sent to Southwestern Texas Synod Border Relief Fund, 1090 Oestreich Drive, Seguin, TX 78155 or [online](#). I have given a donation and invite you to do likewise.

## **A sanctuary denomination**

Last week, meeting as the Churchwide Assembly, the ELCA voted to be designated as a sanctuary denomination. I ask you to read it for yourself, rather than assuming that what you heard on social media was the full and accurate story of this resolution's intent. [Click here for the actual text of the 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. Being a sanctuary denomination will mean different things in different places.

I know that a number of congregations in this synod have already designated themselves as "sanctuary congregations" through the ISAIAH movement. Some have pledged to provide food and material resources to persons fearing deportation or to their families. A few have offered space in their buildings for respite and safe housing.

In each case, the congregation itself deliberated and made a decision to be a part of a formal sanctuary movement. They were not told by others – bishop or denomination – to do so. They prayed, listened, studied and chose how best to respond. In my conversations with the pastors of those choosing to shelter persons within their buildings, I have been assured that the congregations understand the legal consequences their actions may entail.

The congregation decided. The same holds true for all 112 congregations and mission starts of this synod. The suffering of people around the globe; the needs of neighbors in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador; attitudes toward new Americans and recently arrived immigrants; and strategies for showing mercy to others are matters every congregation is called to pray about, study and discern. You are part of defining what being a sanctuary church body means in your context.

## **Responding across this synod**

What I ask of each congregation is that we pray weekly for immigrants and migrants around the globe. We need God's guidance to untangle the complex, global realities that are driving people from their homeland. Seek ways to contribute financially to Lutheran Immigrant and Refugee Services, the Minnesota Council of Churches or Lutheran Social Services of Minnesota, the outreach work in Texas or to your neighborhood food shelf. Write to your legislators, asking that immigration reform be a priority. We won't all agree on what that reform needs to entail, but know that Lutherans have a high regard for God's action through government. Practice "hospitality of the heart"!

Thank you for taking time to read this message. If I have offended you, missed the point, or dismayed you by suggesting what your congregation needs to do, contact me at 651.224.4313 or [patricia.lull@spas-elca.org](mailto:patricia.lull@spas-elca.org). I am asking you to listen to others and I pledge to listen to you.

Yours in God's service,  
Patricia Lull, Bishop