



Northeastern Ohio Synod Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.

[Ephesians 2:19-20 NRSV]

August 13, 2019

Dear siblings in Christ of the Northeastern Ohio Synod,

By now you are aware that on Wednesday, August 7, 2019, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), by a majority of the voting members at the Churchwide Assembly in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, declared itself a sanctuary church body.

Since then, many of you have asked the good Lutheran question, “What does this mean”?

First, allow me to give some background information as to the origin of this declaration. The Churchwide Assembly is the highest legislative body of the ELCA. All decisions made there become the policies and procedures of the ELCA. However, many of these decisions begin as memorials and resolutions from synods, like ours. After screening by a committee, they are passed on to the Churchwide Assembly, with recommendations. The voting members then deliberate and discern the final outcome.

I mention all that because this declaration is not some “mandate from on high.” It is truly the work of the people.

To designate the ELCA as a sanctuary church body is a way of publicly declaring the work we are doing in this and many of our synods, and historically have done throughout the history of our church. Being a sanctuary denomination is about loving our neighbors.

Those of you who attended our Northeastern Ohio Synod Assembly in June will recall that this year's theme was, *Who Is My Neighbor*.

The theme grew out of a resolution which was submitted at last year's synod assembly by one of you, which encouraged us to call for compassionate assistance to migrant parents and children entering the United States. It was referred to Synod Council, which then refined the wording of the resolution and approved it. You can find our completed resolution by clicking [HERE](#).

There are additional statements and resources on our website, www.neos-elca.org. That page includes a [pastoral letter](#) I wrote to you in February of 2017, which has informed and guided much of our work here among you in the Northeastern Ohio mission territory.

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In 2016, the Churchwide Assembly adopted the Strategy to Accompany Migrant Minors with Protection, Advocacy, Representation and Opportunities ([AMMPARO](#)). AMMPARO invites congregations to become “Welcoming Congregations,” which means they commit to spiritually and physically accompanying migrants in their communities, pray for migrant children and families, and advocate for a just and humane immigration system. Here in Northeastern Ohio, our synod’s Ecumenical Committee has been tasked with continuing to seek ways to align our synod’s work more closely with the work of AMMPARO.

Throughout the ELCA, 28 synods have an AMMPARO task force, 41 synods have AMMPARO related activities. Five synods have already designated themselves sanctuary synods.

The declaration of the ELCA as a sanctuary church body broadens the language to describe that work using a word that the world understands.

On a more practical level, being a sanctuary denomination will look different in different contexts. It may mean providing space for people to live; providing financial and legal support to those who are working through the immigration system; or supporting other congregations and service providers. **Congregations, synods, and ministries cannot be mandated or directed to respond in specific ways.** Each is called to work out what this means for them in their context.

It is also important to note that **the designation as a sanctuary body in no way calls for congregations, synods, or ministries to engage in civil disobedience or any illegal actions.** For us, welcoming people is first and foremost a matter of faith, which impacts how we live out all our vocations in God's world, including our political life.

In baptism, we are brought into a covenantal relationship with Jesus Christ that commits us to strive for justice and peace in all the earth. Following the example of Martin Luther, we believe that advocacy is a crucial expression of baptismal identity.

We Lutherans have a unique voice that is needed in the public square. We are called to bring Christian insight into the conversation and make known the clear voice of God’s call to practice radical hospitality and to show the extreme nature of God’s love. God calls us to see beyond our walls, and recognize that we are all creatures created and loved by God.

I pray this information has been helpful. I realize that for some of you, this step that our church has taken may seem unsettling. I would be naïve to think that all of us agree on immigration related issues. We may never agree. But as children of God, which is what we are, we are loved by our Creator regardless of our differing opinion, and for that we say, “Thanks be to God.”

Grace and peace to you,



The Rev. Abraham D. Allende
Bishop