

EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN AMERICA

A Message on . . .

IMMIGRATION

With this message, the Church Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, upon recommendation of the Division for Church in Society, offers to congregations “a resource for deliberation on attitudes regarding immigrants and a resource to interpret and apply ELCA policy related to immigration,” as called for by the 1997 Churchwide Assembly (CA97.6.39).

We recognize and rejoice that our church along with our country continues to change with the steady arrival of newcomers in the United States. Persons who have recently come from Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, and other areas of the world are enriching congregations throughout the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). We celebrate the liturgy in 33 languages; we worship and sing in Spanish with our new *Libro de Liturgia y Cántico*. Newcomers are increasingly assuming leadership roles in our congregations, synods, affiliated educational and social ministry agencies, and churchwide ministries. We are beginning new congregations in immigrant communities. We thank God for these developments, and we remember Paul’s admonition: “Welcome one another, just as Christ has welcomed you, to the glory of God” (Romans 15:7).

We also recognize the obstacles and difficulties our church and society face in welcoming newcomers. Too often we are slow in, tire of, or even resist fostering a hospitable environment for newcomers. Too often we perpetuate the racism, the fear of, and the animosity toward newcomers that show themselves in our society. Our country’s history exhibits an ugly strain of exclusionary attitudes and policies toward newcomers who differ from the majority. In times of economic downturns especially—as happened in the early 1990s—this strain becomes more pervasive and leads to laws that unduly restrict immigration and threaten the well-being of newcomers.

The presence of newcomers in our church and society heightens our awareness of these realities and of the experience of new immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers in the United States. This awareness makes us more appreciative of the gifts our new neighbors bring and of the barriers as well as the opportunities they encounter. It deepens our belief that “all people are God’s creatures, sinners for whom Christ died” and our responsibility to respect the human dignity of all.¹ This is a fitting time for us to examine anew our attitudes toward newcomers, to strengthen our church’s ministry among, with, and for the most vulnerable of newcomers, and to continue to advocate for immigration, refugee, and asylum laws that are fair and generous.

Drawing on our Experience

How do we who are residents learn to welcome newcomers more graciously? As members of a church with immigrants and with roots in immigrant churches in a nation of immigrants, we are familiar with old and new stories about newcomers. We have heard how persons left their homes for economic or political reasons, journeyed into an uncertain future, and struggled in a strange land to begin a new life. There are stories of hardship, tragedy, courage, resourcefulness, and blessing. There are stories of hostile receptions and welcoming embraces, of tensions between immigrants and their children over how to live in a new culture, and of conflicts over what language to use in home and church.

What are the stories of immigration in your congregation? What is different and what is similar in the stories of people whose families had come from Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, or the Middle East? What is different and what is similar in the stories that come from a century ago and a decade ago? How do these stories help you to enter into the experiences of current newcomers?

Recalling these stories may help those of us whose families have been in this country for a generation or more to empathize with today's newcomers. When a young immigrant woman is exploited by her employer, are we outraged? We would have been if that woman were our own mother or grandmother shortly after her arrival. When a beautiful array of people from around the world become citizens, do we rejoice? We would have when our own family became citizens. 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 to hear our own ethnic groups degraded when they first arrived. When we learn how our society is being strengthened and renewed by the contributions of newcomers, are we grateful? Earlier generations were grateful for the contributions of those who entered this country through Angel and Ellis Islands or Miami. Recalling that our families were once the "stranger"—and remembering our Lord's call to love our neighbor as ourselves—can expand our moral imagination, enable us to see the new "stranger" as our neighbor, and open us to welcome today's newcomers.

Our church also has a history of hospitality for refugees. Following World War II, when one out of every six Lutherans in the world was a refugee or displaced person, Lutherans, with the participation of 6,000 congregations, resettled some 57,000 refugees in the United States.² In the decade after the fall of Saigon in 1975, Lutheran congregations sponsored over 50,000 refugees

from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. During the 1980s various congregations provided sanctuary for persons whose lives were endangered by wars in Central America.³ In exercising hospitality to the stranger, many testified that they received more than they gave—as if they had welcomed angels without knowing it (Hebrews 13:2). Their experience invites us to be gracious hosts as well as humble guests, that is, learners from the newcomers among us.

Was your congregation involved in these resettlement efforts? Have you offered hospitality to other refugees or immigrants? If so, what was its significance for the newcomers? For the congregation?

The leaders and congregations that have given us this legacy remind us that hospitality for the uprooted is a way to live out the biblical call to love the neighbor in response to God’s love in Jesus Christ. They recall for us God’s command to Israel: “The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the stranger as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God” (Leviticus 19:34).⁴ They direct us to where Jesus said he is present: “I was a stranger and you welcomed me” (Matthew 25: 35). They call on Martin Luther to ask us: “How do we know that the love of God dwells in us? If we take upon ourselves the need of the neighbor.”⁵ Our desire is to carry on their faith and practice, their exemplary way of faith being active in love. “We pledge to continue our church’s historic leadership in caring for refugees and immigrants.”⁶

Strengthening Our Ministry with the Most Vulnerable

We in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America minister with the most vulnerable of the newcomers through congregations and the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS). Where possible, we work ecumenically. Our ministry resettles refugees, advocates on behalf of detained asylum seekers, assists unaccompanied children, offers pastoral and legal counsel to persons without legal status, aides persons with the citizenship process, and helps newcomers learn to live in a new country. This ministry requires compassion and competence, is time-consuming, sometimes heart-breaking, and frequently unrecognized. Opportunities

Discuss the biblical call to care for the sojourner using “Who is My Neighbor? A Statement of Concern and Commitment,” produced by Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service. The statement draws on Scripture to address anti-immigrant attitudes.

Are there refugees or detained asylum seekers in your area? If so, consider exploring ways your congregation might express your love for these neighbors.

abound for members, congregations, pastors, bishops, and all the expressions of our church to support, strengthen, and expand this ministry.

Refugees are persons who have been forced to leave their country “because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution.” Through Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, in partnership with the federal government, Lutherans help to resettle more than 10,000 refugees yearly (75,000 are allowed to enter the United States, 1998). Because congregations working with the LIRS network enrich refugees’ resettlement experiences, we encourage efforts that call upon and train members to assist refugees.

Persons 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. Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service joins with other organizations to advocate on behalf of detained persons. In areas where there are detention centers, congregations are encouraged to work with these organizations to provide services for the detained and to seek alternatives to detention (for example, group homes).

Unaccompanied minors also enter the United States, either as refugees or without legal status. These children may be orphans, separated from their parents by war or disaster, abandoned, or even smuggled into the country.

“What can we do in our congregation?” A first step is to become acquainted with the immigrant situation in your area. Then ask what Lutheran or ecumenical ministries are present. You may contact your synod office for more information. To see if there is a church-related organization in your area, contact Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service.

Whatever their status, they should be seen first and foremost as children and youth in need of protection and care. The LIRS network provides foster care and related child welfare services, facilitates family reunification, and advocates on national and international policy issues affecting unaccompanied children.

Newcomers without legal documents also are among the most vulnerable. Congregations are called to welcome all people, regardless of

their legal status.⁷ Persons who once were or now are without documents are members of our congregations, and we want them to feel and know that in the Church they are part of a safe and caring community. We encourage bishops and synods to show their support for congregations composed of or working with immigrants—who may or may not have documents.

Some congregations provide congregationally-based immigration services. They offer legal and para-legal advice and assistance to newcomers; even when the legal options are limited, their counsel keeps vulnerable people from becoming the victims of unscrupulous exploiters. These congregations offer English language courses and instruction on how to become a citizen. They help immigrants with housing, jobs, and health care. They accompany families with pastoral care and invite them into a worshipping community. They may look to other congregations for pro bono lawyers, teachers of English as a second language, nurses and doctors, and to secure other needed services. Lutheran child care centers and schools increasingly are serving newcomers.

Those who minister with vulnerable newcomers should not be isolated or disconnected from one another. In order to support and strengthen our church's ministry with immigrants, we encourage churchwide units to continue to work with congregations, synods, and Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service to provide opportunities for these pastors and lay leaders to learn from and support one another.⁸

Pastors and congregations beginning to minister with newcomers in their communities and wanting a basic knowledge of immigration laws and terms can contact Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service.

Newcomers in our church, pastors and congregations ministering with immigrants, and the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service also are educators in our church and advocates for those who cannot speak for themselves. Out of their daily experience, they can teach the rest of us about the gifts newcomers bring to our church and country, the often harsh consequences of recent (1996) immigration and welfare laws on family life, or the way immigrants who lack legal status are taken advantage of in working situations. They keep before us—so that we do not forget—the grim realities many immigrants face and the strength of character and resourcefulness newcomers demonstrate. They inform us of conditions in other countries and what the role of the United States has been. They provide our church with experience and knowledge to take part in public deliberation on immigration, refugee, and asylum policies.

Advocating for Fair and Generous Laws

Our advocacy needs to be accompanied by continuing study. A comprehensive resource for pastors, seminary students, teachers, and other leaders in the church is Dana W. Wilbanks, Re-creating America: The Ethics of U.S. Immigration and Refugee Policy in a Christian Perspective (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996).

Immigration, refugee, and asylum policies express who we are as a nation, influence the nation's future character, and affect the lives of millions of people. We encourage our members, in light of our history and our ministry with newcomers, to join with other citizens in our democratic society to support just laws that serve the common good. Our advocacy needs to take into account the

complexity of issues, the diversity of interests, and the partial or relative justice of laws at the same time that it counters appeals rooted in hostility, racism, prejudice, indifference, and simplistic solutions. We draw on the best of our nation's traditions as a refuge and haven for the persecuted and destitute when we affirm that "we support a generous policy of welcome for refugees and immigrants," and that we "will advocate for just immigration policies, including fairness in visa regulations and in admitting and protecting refugees. We will work for policies that cause neither undue repercussions within immigrant communities nor bias against them."

The following objectives, set forth in a 1969 statement of the Lutheran Council in the United States of America, have been important for Lutheran church bodies and organizations for nearly forty years and have given content to our understanding of fair and generous immigration laws:

1. To admit to our permanent population a steady proportion of newcomers:
 - a. by facilitating the reunification of families;
 - b. by facilitating the entry of persons possessing special skills or other capacities needed by the American economy and culture;
 - c. by assuming the United States' proper share of international responsibility for the resettlement of refugees and other persons urgently in need of the compassionate haven of a new homeland;
 - d. by admitting persons who choose the United States as their new homeland and who impart to their American neighbors an understanding of the culture, attitude, and interests of other races and peoples of the world.

2. To admit annually a reasonable number of the persons described above on an objective basis of selection which, while discriminating, will not be discriminatory with respect to race, national origin, color, or religion, testifying thereby to the United States' recognition of the interlocking and mutual interests of all nations with regard to the migration of peoples, the interaction of cultures, and respect of universal human rights.

3. To provide reasonable access to nationality and citizenship for all immigrants admitted for permanent residence.¹⁰

With this understanding Lutheran advocacy supported the landmark 1965 immigration law that ended the four-decade-old quota system of admitting immigrants on the basis of their national origin and race. In place of that earlier policy that favored European nations, Lutheran advocacy supports the concept of one variable cap for immigrants that in principle gives residents of all nations equal opportunity to immigrate. (In 1998 that cap is set at approximately 900,000 people.) Our advocacy will continue to insist that family reunification should be the primary objective of immigration laws. It will oppose efforts to reduce the percentage of people admitted for family reunification reasons as well as costly financial requirements that prohibit immigrants with limited resources from being reunited with family members. It also will oppose policies and practices that actively recruit workers from developing countries to their detriment and to our country's benefit.

Among the many issues related to immigration policy, we highlight the following areas of concern where we think our country's laws can and should be improved:

Facilitating citizenship

We welcome the desire of immigrants to become citizens. We advocate for Congress to provide the necessary resources and direction for the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) to ensure a reasonable, effective, and short process for citizenship. We call on the Immigration and Naturalization Service to address the backlog of applications and the lengthy wait and unnecessary administrative hassles many immigrants endure. We support the Immigration and Naturalization Service in its efforts to develop a climate of service for its clientele.

For help in your advocacy, ask to be placed on the mailing lists of LIRS's "Action Alert" (See note 1), the Lutheran Office for Governmental Affairs "Legislative Update" (202/783-7507), and your state's public policy office. Contact your synod office for phone numbers. Ask the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service about its "Ambassador Circle."

Benefits for lawful permanent residents

Although Congress has restored some benefits for legal immigrants who arrived before 1996, more should be done. The denial of benefits to permanent residents favors wealthier immigrants and creates unwarranted barriers for poorer ones. Most permanent residents are an integral part of our society who abide by the law, pay Social Security and taxes, and contribute to the economic and cultural life of their communities. In order to help assure their well-being, especially of their children, we support legislation that gives them access to the same benefits citizens receive.

Newcomers without legal status

While most newcomers are legal permanent residents or naturalized citizens, a significant number of people, including many agricultural workers, lack legal documents. Many undocumented persons have been here for years. They live under the fear of deportation. Those who become eligible to adjust their status are only allowed to do so by leaving the United States and then waiting years to re-enter. They often fear returning to a troubled land, and if they were to return, it would mean for many indefinite separation from their families in the United States. The existence of a permanent sub-group of people who live without recourse to effective legal protection opens the door for their massive abuse and exploitation and harms the common good. We urge leaders and citizens to seek feasible responses to this situation that offer flexible and humane ways for undocumented persons who have been in this country for a specified amount of time to be able to adjust their legal status.

Refugee policy

Although there are tens of millions of refugees throughout the world, the number admitted into the United States has been decreasing. We believe that our country has a responsibility to increase the number of refugees it admits. We also are concerned that race not be a prejudicial factor in decisions about resettlement, and we urge our government to do more to provide African refugees a fair opportunity to be resettled in our country. We also support fair and compassionate legislative solutions to the precarious plight of refugees whose present temporary legal status is threatened.

Asylum

We advocate for a reliable, consistent, and sensitive implementation of the law governing asylum seekers. At present INS districts treat similar cases in vastly different ways. We oppose practices that create unreasonable obstacles and unattainable standards of proof for those seeking asylum. We support efforts to ensure that due process is followed and that the conditions of detention are humane. We call upon the Immigration and Naturalization

Service to recognize the particular vulnerabilities of children by developing child-appropriate standards and procedures. We encourage that agency vigorously to use the channels of communication it has developed with refugee organizations to improve processes and conditions for asylum seekers.

Border with Mexico

We recognize the right of all countries to control their borders and their duty to protect their citizens from the illegal entry of drugs and criminals. But we have serious doubts about the rightness and effectiveness of current policy to erect imposing barriers between the United States and Mexico. We support the search for alternatives to this policy that would more appropriately reflect the relationship of two friendly nations whose peoples and economies are increasingly interdependent. Whatever the policy, border enforcement should always respect the human dignity of persons attempting to cross the border.

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). As we journey together through the time God has given us, may God give us the grace of a welcoming heart and an overflowing love for the new neighbors among us.

This message was approved by the Board of the Division for Church in Society and was adopted by the Church Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America on November 16, 1998.

Definitions

Asylum seekers

Persons who have fled their country because of personal danger, who arrive in the United States without legal protection, and who must prove a “credible fear of persecution” to receive an opportunity to seek legal protective status or asylum.

Immigrants

In immigration law, and as generally used in the message, immigrants are lawful permanent residents or naturalized citizens who have come from another country and legally live in the United States. In common usage, immigrants may refer to all newcomers who now live in this country.

Lawful Permanent Residents

Non-citizens who have received authorization to live permanently in the United States. They receive a “green card” to prove their status.

Newcomers without legal documents

Persons who have entered the United States without a valid visa or who have remained in the country after their temporary visa has expired. The message also may refer to this group of people as “persons without legal status” or “undocumented persons.”

Refugees

Persons who have “a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.” This definition from the United Nations’ 1951 “Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees” was adopted by the United States in the Refugee Act of 1980.

Notes

1. “For Peace in God’s World” (ELCA social statement, 1995), p. 13. This social statement, as well as “Freed in Christ: Race, Ethnicity and Culture” (ELCA social statement, 1993), provide theological, global, and domestic context for this message. The proposed social statement on economic life to be considered at the 1999 ELCA Churchwide Assembly also will likely refer to the global economic and political realities that are causing the worldwide movement of peoples. “For Peace in God’s World” calls upon us to “foster a dynamic vision of difference in unity” and to “promote respect for human rights,” pp. 13-14.

2. Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS) is a national agency of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, and the Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to carry out ministry with uprooted people. LIRS traces its history back to 1939 and to this major resettlement effort following World War II. References to LIRS in this message include its 27 affiliates and other organizations in its network. Lutheran social ministry organizations are integral affiliates in this network. LIRS's address is 390 Park Avenue South, New York, NY 10016-8803. Its phone number is 212/532-6350; its fax, 212/683-1329, and its e-mail, lirs@lirs.org. Its Web page is found at www.lirs.org. In September 1999 LIRS will move its headquarters to Baltimore, Maryland.

3. For a history of Lutheran resettlement work until 1991, see Richard W. Solberg, *Open Doors: The Story of Lutherans Resettling Refugees* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1992). At a time when some Lutheran groups and congregations declared their church buildings to be sanctuaries for persons who lacked legal status, The American Lutheran Church offered guidance on sanctuary in the social statement, "Human Law and the Conscience of Believers" (1984), pp. 15-19. The 1989 ELCA Churchwide Assembly resolved to "express support to congregations that are offering various forms of aid to refugees fleeing from Central America" (CA89.4.21).

4. The text uses the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) translation except that it substitutes the Revised Standard Version translation "stranger" for the NRSV "alien."

5. Solberg, p. 45.

6. "For Peace in God's World," p. 21. This social statement also addresses our responsibility for refugees in other parts of the world and calls upon us to address the conditions that lead to people being uprooted from their homes.

7. "This church acknowledges its responsibility of ministering to and advocating the human rights of undocumented aliens now in Canada and the United States." From "Implementing Resolutions for Human Rights Social Statement" (Lutheran Church in America, 1978).

8. These churchwide units include the Division for Outreach, the Commission for Multicultural Ministries, the Division for Church in Society, the Division for Congregational Ministries, and the Division for Higher Education and Schools.

9. The first affirmation comes from "For Peace in God's World," pp. 20-21, and the second from "Freed in Christ: Race, Ethnicity, and Culture," p. 7. We who welcome newcomers also have responsibility to help them understand our diverse society and shun our society's prejudices and racism.

10. "A Statement on Immigration Policies: Moral Issues and National Interest" (Lutheran Council in the United States of America, 1969), pp. 4-5. A slightly different version was first adopted by the National Lutheran Council in 1960. See Solberg, p. 76.



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