



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

ELCA Church Council Sanctuary Guidelines

Introduction

With overwhelming support, the 2019 ELCA Churchwide Assembly adopted a memorial to become a sanctuary church body (CA19.03.07; see the action at www.elca.org/sanctuarychurch). The memorial was amended on the floor of the assembly to refer to the ELCA Church Council the question of what it means to be a sanctuary church body in practice.

In 2019, the ELCA had five synods and at least 60 congregations that had declared themselves “sanctuary,” and there was also broad participation from ELCA members in the New Sanctuary Movement in the United States.¹ That same year, the ELCA had seven congregations actually hosting people in sanctuary.

At its November 2019 meeting, the Church Council affirmed (CC11.19.47t) a timeline that included the following consultation process: 1) AMMPARO staff, as well as others in the churchwide organization, reached out to other denominations that have supported sanctuary congregations, requesting any materials or resolutions they had produced. 2) A Sanctuary Memorial Advisory Team, composed of a small number of churchwide staff, was appointed to assist the AMMPARO Sanctuary Team (referred to hereafter as “Team”) in this process. 3) In January 2020, the Team convened the five sanctuary synods and selected sanctuary hosting congregations to receive their guidance and suggestions. Representatives from the ELCA Church Council and Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service and staff from the churchwide organization were also present at that meeting. 4) The Team solicited suggestions and advice at the March 2020 joint meeting of the Church Council and Conference of Bishops. 5) The Team initiated an online survey at elca.org so that ELCA members could offer suggestions. The response was limited, possibly due to the pandemic. 6) The Team presented a draft of the suggested ELCA Church Council Sanctuary Guidance to the spring 2021 Conference of Bishops meeting for feedback. 7) This document is the Team’s final report to the Church Council on sanctuary guidance, for consideration at its spring 2021 meeting.

The purpose of this document is to provide guidance to congregations, synods and the churchwide organization on the invitation to action from the Sanctuary Memorial, recognizing that our understanding of sanctuary will evolve amid changing contexts.

Sanctuary in General: Opening Comments

Sanctuary has a rich history and an important connection to faith traditions. The practice predates the Middle Ages, when churches provided temporary places of safety. Lutheran churches have practiced sanctuary in many forms and for many generations. Despite the historic and religious roots of sanctuary, it has no legal nor universally accepted definition. A broad understanding of sanctuary has allowed

¹ The “New Sanctuary Movement” is not a formal organization per se but a term that has come to describe individuals and groups engaged in similar sanctuary activities in solidarity with one another. Thus “sanctuary” is a movement, not an issue.

churches and organizations to live into the definition of sanctuary in many ways, all rooted in the principle of providing refuge, safety and hospitality.

U.S. law has never defined nor recognized sanctuary, but the 2019 Churchwide Assembly action itself includes a “sanctuary is” framing that draws from the experience of communities already doing this work. This framing is helpful because it provides some broad examples that are widely accepted to be sanctuary in practice today. They go beyond the practice of hosting people in congregations and are grounded in the Christian definition of refuge. For the purposes of this document, sanctuary can be generally defined as walking alongside, or accompanying, immigrants and refugees. There may be common activities across different communities, congregations and synods, as well as the churchwide organization, but each must discern what sanctuary means based on the immigrant and refugee communities around it. Many of our Lutheran communities have been living their call to provide sanctuary for decades, and as a denomination, we have many theological documents that root our faith in the practice of sanctuary, even if we have not used this definition until now. This document explores what it may mean for the ELCA to continue this ministry, seeking to be a safe and welcoming place for all who leave their communities.

As people who live solely by faith and fear of God, Lutherans hold this vulnerability and tension in the theology of the cross. When we view the world through the light of God’s redeeming presence and work, we see that no place or person is forsaken. God’s invocation to love the neighbor calls this church to public witness and solidarity with the oppressed, marginalized and downtrodden. Sanctuary is another opportunity for people of faith to be present as faithful disciples of Christ’s example in public life. It can and has led people to ELCA congregations looking for community and ways to serve. Many people see this assembly action as an invitation and encouragement to discernment — how might Lutherans be called to respond to the needs of the neighbor? This church is, in large part, an immigrant church with roots all over the world, and it has faithfully welcomed and supported refugee resettlement for over 80 years. The ELCA’s strong global commitment has gifted its members with church relationships in countries from which immigrants are coming to the United States. This helps ELCA members understand why people flee their homes and undertake the perilous journey — to save their own lives.

The ELCA is an interdependent church represented through congregations, synods and the churchwide organization. Each interdependent entity is trusted to respond and listen to the movement of the spirit. As an interdependent church, we need to hold all members, congregations and synods, as well as the churchwide organization, in prayer around this issue, especially at moments of tension. Though synods and entire church bodies can declare sanctuary, to date the most extensive lived experience of sanctuary has been in congregations. Therefore, we need to lift up and spread the stories of those congregations that have direct experience with sanctuary.

Each of the five sanctuary synods and dozens of congregations that have declared sanctuary have their own unique definitions of it and the resulting work. Respecting the wisdom and autonomy of each, the Team recommends that the Church Council refrain from mandating one specific definition of sanctuary for all. This guidance, together with ELCA social policy, is provided to all with the hope and expectation that it will assist in their discernment.

Although the ELCA is the first church body to declare sanctuary, most major interreligious faith traditions in the United States have local expressions of sanctuary, which often work together ecumenically and on an interfaith basis, with the encouragement of their national staff. Thus, the ELCA’s approach to sanctuary can be seen as a way to live into this church’s ecumenical and interreligious relationships as well. Each congregation, synod and ministry of the ELCA is uniquely positioned to participate in the movement-building of sanctuary.

Relationships and stories are the most important, powerful and transformative means by which this whole church can better understand sanctuary.

The following is guidance suggested by the ELCA Church Council for ways the congregations, synods and churchwide organization can accompany and support the ministry of sanctuary.

Sanctuary Guidance for Congregations

Many people describe sanctuary as hosting an immigrant community member in a congregation, but the New Sanctuary Movement defines sanctuary expansively. Far from being confined to one activity, it goes beyond hosting someone and often involves accompanying individuals or migrant communities with advocacy and both tangible and intangible resources.

The ELCA's sanctuary work is a public witness that leads people to ELCA congregations looking for community and ways to get involved. In this light, congregations are invited and encouraged to SERVE, CARE, SUPPORT AND EDUCATE, always through the lens of accompaniment, in the following ways:

- 1) Build authentic and mutual relationships with immigrants in their communities, and listen to and amplify immigrant voices the congregation hears, whether the context is geographical (urban, suburban, exurban, rural) or intergenerational (college-age, retired or a mix of these). Building relationships will provide opportunities for congregations to reflect on what welcome and hospitality mean for each community. Not all churches have the same call, so consider teaming up with other faith communities that are living into sanctuary.
- 2) Grow in a firm foundation of the practice of accompaniment by sharing and reflecting on the decades-long story of Lutherans accompanying immigrants, and by reading the ELCA social message "Immigration" (1998) as well as the social policy resolution "Toward Compassionate, Just, and Wise Immigration Reform" (CA09.11.71). Review materials such as "Know Your Rights" information to better understand current U.S. immigration law and its complexities. Hear testimony from other congregations engaged in sanctuary discernment and/or action. Visit www.elca.org/ammparo and www.lirs.org.
- 3) Deepen relationships with individuals and congregations that are already in relationship with immigrant communities. Faith communities should be multiplying and amplifying rather than duplicating the work already happening. Congregations are especially encouraged to build relationships with existing sanctuary groups in their communities.
- 4) Understand that sanctuary is broadly defined and encourage a healthy and helpful process for discernment, grounded in testimony/learnings from the discernment processes of other congregations, so that each congregation has the space to define what sanctuary can be in its own context.
- 5) Look to their synods to confirm whether there are resources available for sanctuary, recognizing that these will vary from synod to synod. In any case, congregations can look to the churchwide organization for help in identifying networks of trusted messengers to assist them as well as coaches/people to guide them.
- 6) Host a presentation on sanctuary and pursue public dialogue led by people who have deep relationships with immigrant communities. Then, as a community, discern where the congregation is called to minister. Each congregation is invited to connect with other faith communities that are in relationship with immigrants. This will prepare the congregation to provide information to someone requesting sanctuary.

Guidance for Synods

As with sanctuary congregations, there is no one definition of a sanctuary synod; each has its own context. Whether or not a synod has declared itself a sanctuary or has any sanctuary congregations, all synods can recognize the mission moment of this work and can:

- 1) Gather and amplify the stories of their congregations founded by immigrants, sharing them throughout the synod, along with an invitation to study and discern sanctuary. Synods can find a platform on which to share these stories by contacting the Team (infoammparo@elca.org).
- 2) Examine the makeup of their communities to see where there are immigrants, and encourage their congregations to connect with immigrant community organizations. Synods are encouraged to find ways to support the dignity and worth of immigrant neighbors without creating negative perceptions.
- 3) Provide resources to congregations that will encourage them to offer hospitality to their immigrant neighbors. Other training and education on racial justice and intersectionality will be helpful for both rostered and lay leaders as well as congregations. Provide resources and support to congregations interested in exploring sanctuary. This can include forming a network of coaches to help congregations learn about sanctuary and whose leaders could use seasoned assistance to locate the right path of service with local immigrant communities.
- 4) Facilitate the creation of a sanctuary congregation network and provide guidance for building local teams to support and accompany sanctuary congregations. These local teams can provide table fellowship dinners and support circles. Ideally these teams would include members of local immigrant communities and other trusted messengers to build meaningful relationships with each other.
- 5) Encourage the use of underutilized synod or congregation buildings to house newly arrived immigrants as they transition to life in the United States. Consider offering family-support grants for sanctuary hosting congregations.
- 6) Encourage the creation of a support community among congregations to form immigrant welcoming centers.

Continued support and accompaniment, especially of sanctuary hosting congregations, are critical if congregations are to build authentic mutual relationships with immigrant communities.

Guidance for the Churchwide Organization

Recognizing that the ELCA is the first sanctuary church body in the Americas, the Team hopes that these recommendations will provide guidance in response to the assembly action. The outdated and complex U.S. immigration system can be difficult to address. The ELCA rejects the common misconception that people in sanctuary are criminals; at the same time, it has no intention of shielding anyone from the consequences of criminal activity.

In response to the assembly action on sanctuary, the ELCA Church Council directs the churchwide organization to provide resources that will help ELCA members understand sanctuary, and to look for ways to financially support sanctuary work. The council asks the churchwide organization to:

- 1) Provide and review current educational resources on sanctuary, which may focus on preaching, Bible study, accessible immigration messages or our Lutheran history of welcome and hospitality. These should amplify the stories of congregations that live out sanctuary as well as other stories that explore our experiences and vulnerabilities and identify places of and opportunities for growth. Fact sheets that define “immigrant,” “refugee” and “asylum-seeker” could be helpful, as could legal information, especially for congregations that are considering hosting. Understanding why people immigrate can help some to better

understand sanctuary. Resources should feature immigrant Lutherans leading the conversation and explain the accompaniment values of the ELCA. Resources can draw connections among ELCA governing documents, assembly and/or council actions, and social teaching documents. Attention should be drawn to the relevant portions of the ELCA social statement *The Church and Criminal Justice: Hearing the Cries*² and the ELCA social policy resolution “Toward Compassionate, Just, and Wise Immigration Reform” (CA09.11.71). These resources will show how congregations and synods can advocate for immigrants and refugees, regardless of the term used.

- 2) Provide synod bishops, churchwide staff and the Church Council with immigration and sanctuary training, which may include immersion experiences.
- 3) Encourage seminaries, campus ministries, outdoor ministries and other organizations to provide learning opportunities about accompaniment and sanctuary through Bible studies or “lunch-and-learn” events where interested people can gather on a regular basis for exploration and discernment.
- 4) Highlight connections between Future Church and sanctuary.
- 5) Find ways to support congregations and synods in providing immigrant welcome centers.
- 6) Advocate for just immigration policy and for justice in specific sanctuary cases. Find new ways to engage more ELCA members in advocacy for justice grounded in faith.
- 7) Choreograph opportunities for faith communities to connect with new immigrant populations in rural areas and to witness accompaniment ministry with people who are trusted in immigrant communities. The churchwide organization can assist by helping rural congregations without these tools connect with other rural congregations in the same region that already have tools and trusted messengers.
- 8) Enable synod-to-synod sharing to define and develop best practices.

What one ELCA synod or community defines as sanctuary does not redefine what sanctuary means for another community, yet one can broaden the definition to the point of diluting its meaning. Respecting the work of our immigrant, ecumenical and interfaith partners, the ELCA will encourage conversation with international companions, with other faith groups and with ethnic-specific ministries.

God’s people have been on the move since biblical times, yet the world faces a historic moment in which more people are migrating than ever before. The confluence of climate change, war, violence, corruption and poverty creates situations of vulnerability, compelling people to leave their homes and take often-perilous journeys to save their own lives. God calls people of faith to value the dignity of each human made in God’s image. This guidance on being a sanctuary church body is one way for the whole church to fully live out God’s call.

For questions about sanctuary church contact:

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https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Criminal_JusticeSS.pdf?_ga=2.180828644.291030847.1611873721-1911349169.1590679087 and (Spanish)

https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/La_Iglesia_Y_La_Justicia_Penal_Escuchemos_Los_La_mentos.pdf?_ga=2.155023739.291030847.1611873721-1911349169.1590679087.