



# Northeastern Ohio Synod Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

## PASTORAL LETTER ON RECENT IMMIGRATION CRISIS

February 2, 2017

*For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment,  
"You shall love your neighbor as yourself."*

[Galatians 5:14]

*I was a stranger and you welcomed me...*

[Matthew 25:35]

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ and people of God in the Northeastern Ohio Synod,

The recent immigration crisis has invited this pastoral response which I hope will show what we Lutherans believe and how we address matters affecting the stranger among us and the stranger who seeks welcome.

As Lutherans, we are an immigrant church, and a church that has a long history of caring for refugees, immigrants, and asylum-seekers. Many of our parishes began as havens of refuge for newcomers to these United States. First, the Germans, then the Danes, the Norwegians, the Finns, and the Scandinavians all came to this continent in search of religious freedom as well as a better opportunity for their children. Several of our parishes still worship in the native language of the immigrants who founded them.

In the 1940's, the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service began as a resettlement agency for German refugees who were escaping the intolerable conditions of Nazi Germany.

It would be worthwhile to keep in mind that even though the terms refugee, immigrant, and asylum seeker may describe a person's situation, those words do not define *who* that person is. A refugee, immigrant, or asylum seeker is first and foremost, a human being, created and loved by God, with pride, dignity and a sense of self-worth, aspirations, hopes and dreams. It is people seeking refuge and shelter in another country because they are fleeing from desperate situations, from war and violence, from grinding poverty and other conditions that threaten the lives, health and well-being of families. Many die in pursuit of the dream of a new life. Countless numbers of them are blessed with gifts and skills that can only serve to enhance the civic, cultural, social and industrial fabric of society.

Holy Scripture abounds with stories of immigration. One could call the Bible the ultimate immigration handbook. From the very beginning we read accounts of people moving from one place to the other, some with no known destination. Welcoming the stranger is the central theme of biblical hospitality. It is an inclusive hospitality that always makes room for the stranger. It also points out that no person is to be excluded.

As Christians, we are called to live lives of radical welcome. Christ calls his people—you and me—to respond to human needs without distinction, not just those persons who share our religious or ethnic ties.

When we are challenged by distrust of different beliefs, we respond with passionate conviction to defend the equally passionate conviction of those beliefs. When suspicion breeds fear, we reach beyond fear to show them the love that we have been shown in Jesus Christ. Our hearts tremble with an anxiety equal to the trembling of their hearts. We honor the strength of humanity disclosed in their faith by offering them the strength of humanity disclosed in ours. In this way, all of God's beloved children are enriched by the grace that sustains us.

An opportunity has presented itself to learn more about others, to build and strengthen relationships with people who are different from ourselves, to extend our compassion to a stranger so that they feel the love; warmth and welcome of our great nation.

As Lutherans, the covenant we made in baptism, our obedience to the gospel and our immigrant roots, call for us to be disciples of God's grace throughout the earth. God's command to love our neighbor is not simply the second half of the great commandment; it continues to be the source that enlivens the church.

Following God's mandate it is essential that we continue to work to advocate for and protect the rights and dignity of the most vulnerable in our society. But our mission does not end here. We continue to love those with whom we disagree, while we seek common understanding through compassionate dialogue.

It is also important that we listen to ourselves. Let our words be an invitation to mutual upbuilding. Words have power. As the Apostle Paul advises in his letter to the Ephesians: "*Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear.*" [Eph. 4:29]

Our mission as a church has always been to build a future together that includes everyone. Such action has the potential to transform our society.

I conclude with a prayer, modified from page 77 of our *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* hymnal:

*Holy God, in the Trinity you show us the splendor of diversity and the beauty of unity in your own divine life. Make us, who came from many nations with many languages, a united people that delights in our many different gifts. Where hearts are fearful and constricted, grant courage and hope. Where anxiety is infectious and widening, grant peace and reassurance. Where distrust twists our thinking, grant healing and illumination. Defend our liberties, and give those whom we have entrusted with authority the spirit of wisdom, that there might be justice and peace in our land. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ, our sovereign and our Savior. Amen*

God's blessings,



+Bishop Abraham Allende  
*The Presentation of Our Lord, 2017*