**Bishop Hutterer: Sanctuary, What Does It Mean?**

Dear Friends in Christ,

Many of you know the [ELCA Churchwide Assembly](https://elca.org/cwa) convened in Milwaukee, Wisconsin last week. There were 927 voting participants.

The Grand Canyon Synod sent voting members: Paul Gryniewicz, Pastor David Brandfass, Veronica Alvarez, Erin LaHaye, Pastor Chon Pugh, Mike Johnson, Renee Waterstradt, Pastor Maria Valenzuela, Deacon Janice Zimbelman, Roger Bailey and me. It was a joy and privilege to spend time with this dedicated and faithful group.

In addition to daily worship, during the business meetings there were many decisions and conversations, including resolutions and memorials. Among the business items addressed included a resolution on the subject of Sanctuary. The Grand Canyon Synod supports/endorses the **Background Provided to the Assembly by the Memorials Committee,**which you can read below in italics.

***Assembly Action, by majority***

* *CA19. 03.11 To receive with gratitude the memorial from the Metropolitan New York Synod concerning sanctuary;*
* *To reaffirm the long-term and growing commitment of this church to migrants and refugees and to the policy questions involved, as exemplified most recently in the comprehensive strategy Accompanying Migrant Minors with Protection, Advocacy, Representation and Opportunities (AMMPARO);*
* *To recognize that the ELCA in congregations, synods and the churchwide organization are already taking the actions requested by this memorial; and*
* *To request that appropriate staff on the* [*AMMPARO*](https://www.elca.org/ammparo) *team,* [*LIRS*](https://www.lirs.org/) *and the* [*Domestic Mission*](https://www.elca.org/About/Churchwide/Domestic-Mission)*,* [*Global Mission*](https://www.elca.org/About/Churchwide/Global-Mission)*, and* [*Mission Advancement*](https://www.elca.org/About/Churchwide/Mission-Advancement) *units review the existing strategies and practices by the five current sanctuary synods and develop a plan for additional tools that provide for education and discernment around sanctuary;*
* *The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America declares itself a sanctuary church body; and*
* *To request the ELCA Church Council, in consultation with the appropriate churchwide units and offices, provide guidance for the three expressions of this church about what it means to be a sanctuary church body and provide a report to the 2022 Churchwide Assembly.*

**WHAT BECOMING A SANCTUARY DENOMINATION DOES NOT MEAN:**

Some thoughts from a legal perspective provided by the ELCA legal counsel, Thomas Cunniff…

* From a polity standpoint: Nothing in this action binds synods, congregations, or any other organizations affiliated with the church; it binds only Churchwide. This resolution does not require congregations to do anything. I want to make this clear to congregations and others.
* [View this ACLU resource on sanctuary](https://www.aclu.org/other/sanctuary-congregations-and-harboring-faq). It is an excellent explainer of the difference between legal and illegal actions that often fall under the name “sanctuary,” and the gray areas around those.
* There is no call in the action for civil disobedience or any illegal actions. The specific actions mentioned are all legal. Whether any person or organization chooses to engage in civil disobedience (and therefore accept the consequences) is up to them. The Churchwide organization does not understand this action as calling for any illegal actions.
* Fourth, the action does not attempt to answer the question, “What does this mean?” Instead, the action specifically requests ELCA Church Council provide guidance as to what it means to be a sanctuary denomination.

**WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?**

* 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. The ELCA Churchwide Assembly—the highest legislative authority of the ELCA—is declaring that when we preach on Sunday that Jesus told us to welcome our neighbor, we will use our hands and voices on Monday to make sure it happens.
* 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. As a church, we have advocated for stopping the detention of children and families for decades. We have spoken out against family separation, sought a pathway to citizenship for community members that have lived in the U.S. for many years, and have taken steps to address the root causes of migration in a way that honors the humanity in people who must flee.
* Being a sanctuary denomination means that we, as church together, want to be public and vocal about this work. At the same time, we will have conversations about what sanctuary means with many of our members and discern future action and direction. 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.
* To declare ourselves a sanctuary church body is to say that we seek to provide concrete resources to assist the most vulnerable, especially families and very young children, who are feeling the sharp edges of this broken system. are seeking nothing more than a safe place to live in peace.
* Being a sanctuary denomination is about loving our neighbors. While we may have different ideas about how to fix this system that separates children from their parents and keeps them in deplorable conditions. and we may have different ways of loving our neighbors, our call to love our neighbor is central to our faith, regardless of their nationality or current circumstances.
* 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. We cannot mandate or direct our congregations and ministries to respond in specific ways. Each must work out what this means for them in their own context or in partnership with other caring communities of faith.
* While we don’t yet know the full scope of the work that this declaration will open for the church, we do know that our faith communities are already doing sanctuary work. Sanctuary for a congregation may mean hosting English as a second Language (ESL) classes, marching as people of faith against the detention of children and families, providing housing for a community member facing deportation, or, in some of our congregations, having thoughtful conversations about what our faith says about immigration. All of these are a step closer to sanctuary in our faith communities and sanctuary in our world for people who must leave their homes.
* Except for our members whose ancestors were here before European settlement or others who were forced to come to the U.S. against their will, the ELCA is an immigrant church. Our decades long work with immigrants and refugee *is* how we practice our faith in the world. Lutherans started Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, one of the nine refugee resettlement agencies in the U.S.
* At our last assembly, we also committed to walking alongside Central American children and families fleeing their communities by passing the AMMPARO strategy (Accompanying Migrant Minors with Protection, Advocacy, Representation and Opportunities).
* Through the AMMPARO strategy, we are also working through our global partners in Central America to alleviate the conditions that cause people to migrate. We support organizations and faith communities that work with deported migrants in Central America and advocate for the humane treatment of immigrants in Mexico. In the U.S., we have a network of 151 welcoming and sanctuary congregations that are committed to working on migration issues and a welcome for immigrant communities. The church also has five sanctuary synods (our regional structures), all of which do work with immigrants, refugees and asylum-seekers.

As with all resolutions, this resolution uses language that includes “encourage, assist, coordinate, engage.” It does not use language that includes “require, demand, expect.”

In my personal view, resolutions are best used as opportunities to engage people at a point that best fits their starting point, and moves them forward. You and your congregation know that starting point best. It is my hope and prayer that this letter provides some clarity for you and your congregation or ministry setting.

Please contact me, or any of the voting members if you have additional questions.

In Christ,

The Rev. Deborah K. Hutterer  
Bishop  
Grand Canyon Synod of the ELCA