

Background Provided to the Assembly by the Memorials Committee

Christians have offered sanctuary for two thousand years, continuing an ancient biblical practice in which cities and houses of worship provided refuge and asylum for people fleeing injustice. Beginning in the 1980s, the Sanctuary Movement was a faith-based initiative to protect Central American refugees fleeing civil war and seeking safety in the U.S. Today, the New Sanctuary Movement is a revived effort to protect undocumented migrants from needless jailing procedures and deportation, and addresses the dire situation within the Department of Health and Human Services that has resulted in the stripping of services to refugees and unaccompanied children. In contrast with the historic Sanctuary Movement, many of the migrants protected under sanctuary have lived in the U.S. for an extended period.

While there is no uniform or legally accepted definition of sanctuary, its overall purpose is to protect people from immigration laws that lead to the deportation of undocumented people who are part of our communities and may have U.S. citizen children. Part of what it means to provide sanctuary to immigrants seeking protection is having lawyers handling their cases. If they are hosted in a congregation, it is a temporary measure.

The ways in which sanctuary is provided varies by congregation, but it can include providing a physical shelter, inviting and welcoming all to worship regardless of immigration status, providing services to migrants such as “Know Your Rights” presentations, and assisting all regardless of immigration status. Moreover, actively advocating for migrants and for a fair and just immigration system is part of sanctuary.

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. ELCA sanctuary congregations that host and support immigrants seeking protection do these same activities and have joined AMMPARO.

While these activities are completely legal, other activities such as knowingly concealing, harboring or shielding (or attempting to conceal, harbor or shield) an undocumented immigrant from detection by the authorities are not. Likewise, knowingly transporting or moving (or attempting to transport or move) an undocumented immigrant from one place to another, where the transportation helps the immigrant remain in the United States unlawfully, is illegal. Each congregation has its own theological reasons for taking part in the New Sanctuary Movement, but the call of our faith is universally seen as a way to protect human dignity in a system that not only seems to disrupt family reunification processes but also leans toward unjust immigration enforcement, detention and investigations.

Through the AMMPARO strategy, the ELCA already affirms the spirit of the sanctuary movement by encouraging congregations to serve and support the protection of migrants in their communities. Within AMMPARO, there are already self-determined ELCA sanctuary synods and sanctuary congregations that define and practice sanctuary differently. The ELCA sanctuary synods are Oregon, Sierra Pacific, Southwest California, New England and Metropolitan New York. All of these sanctuary synods, as well as many ELCA sanctuary congregations, already connect with the AMMPARO movement.

As a denomination, through AMMPARO, the churchwide organization provides educational and practical resources and information for congregations as they consider their role in providing sanctuary and joining their local sanctuary movement. As AMMPARO, staff have encouraged welcoming congregations to connect to their local sanctuary movement or other organizations that serve migrant communities. The ELCA Church Council action taken in November 2017 [CC17.11.33w] supported the spirit of the sanctuary movement and requested the churchwide organization to provide guidance and information.

In this memorial, the ELCA is being called to take specifically defined actions through its congregations, synods and churchwide expressions. These are concrete ways the ELCA can support migrants and refugees in our communities. None of the recommended actions by the Memorials Committee breaks U.S. law in any form and all contribute to the protection of vulnerable people in our midst.

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 team, LIRS and the Domestic Mission, Global Mission, and 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.