

# Indiana-Kentucky Synod

## Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

911 E. 86<sup>th</sup> Street, Suite 200, Indianapolis, IN 46240 + 317-253-3522 + [www.iksynod.org](http://www.iksynod.org)

**Rev. Dr. William O. Gafkjen, Bishop**

**Email: [bishopbill@iksynod.org](mailto:bishopbill@iksynod.org)**

August 12, 2019

Dear Members and Friends of the Indiana-Kentucky Synod,

As you know, the triennial Churchwide Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America met in Milwaukee, Wisconsin August 5-10, 2019. On Wednesday August 7, the Assembly adopted a resolution that, among other things, declared the ELCA to be “a sanctuary church body.” This declaration has triggered a great deal of interest, debate, and criticism in social and news media, as well as among the members and friends of the ELCA across the country and this synod. Some of this has risen to a confused frenzy of questions and accusations, many of which arise from misunderstanding and, in some cases, misrepresentation of what the resolution actually says and means. With this letter, I invite you to take a deep breath with me and take some time to explore this resolution under the classic Lutheran catechetical question, “What does this mean?”

Given the sorts of misrepresentation and misinformation that have been floating around, before engaging in any discussion of this decision – or posting on social media about it – **it is crucial that we all become familiar with the “original sources.”** Here are some links that will assist you and your congregation to access these sources:

- The text of the resolution itself as reported in the Assembly’s Legislative Update:  
<https://s3.amazonaws.com/media.guidebook.com/upload/151152/11knAW9oxkPo5YZAeqlVhMih9vkHyOBVvTvb.pdf>
- Videos of the discussion on the floor of the Assembly. You will need to use the slide bar on the bottom of the video to get to the time mark indicated (hour:minute).
  - Wed. morning – Discussion begins at 1:09: <https://youtu.be/EbOyMdeAqV0>
  - Wed. afternoon – Discussion starts at 1:21: <https://youtu.be/a0-QMl5szYU>
- The ELCA’s Social Teaching Statement on Immigration will also be helpful in providing some of the context and history that informed this decision. Through this page you will also find links to a couple of other documents about immigration that have been adopted since this one in 1998:  
<https://www.elca.org/en/Faith/Faith-and-Society/Social-Messages/Immigration>

In this resolution, the ELCA in Assembly reaffirmed “the long-term and growing commitment of this church to migrants and refugees and to the policy questions involved.” In other words, **declaring the ELCA to be a sanctuary church body is a public declaration that we will continue and deepen what we have been doing as a church for some time in support of refugees and immigrants.** Partnering with agencies like Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services ([LIRS](#)), we will continue to assist refugees and other immigrants to find homes and communities to welcome them and assist them in establishing a flourishing life in this country. The ELCA will also continue to accompany and advocate for immigrants who are seeking asylum and do what we can to see that undocumented immigrants are aware of, understand, and live into their rights under US law. This sort of ministry is expressed most clearly through [AMMPARO](#), Accompanying Migrant Minors with Protection, Advocacy, Representation and Opportunities.

This resolution also “recognizes that the ELCA in congregations, synods and the churchwide organization are already taking the actions recommended by this memorial” and requests “that appropriate staff” from various agencies and ministries “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.” Note the verbs used here: recognize, request, review, provide. Note well: **There is no requirement that any particular synod, congregation, or person provide sanctuary or engage in advocacy or other ministry with or on behalf of refugees or other immigrants.** In other words, the Churchwide Assembly’s declaration that the ELCA is a sanctuary denomination binds only the ELCA Churchwide Organization; it does not bind congregations, synods, or other organizations.

The ELCA and its leadership, including yours truly, support the work that some among us engage with and on behalf of refugees and other immigrants. We are committed to providing resources in support of that ministry. At the same time we do not require that others among our number to engage such ministry, advocacy, and action. We are also committed to “love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor” in the name of Jesus across our differences in perspective and action in this and other concerns [Romans 12:10].

Please note: **The Churchwide Assembly did not call for any illegal actions**, all actions mentioned by the Churchwide Assembly are legal. Whether any person or organization chooses to engage in civil disobedience (and therefore accept the consequences) is up to them. Nevertheless, one panelist in one of the news reports that I saw misguidedly proclaimed that the ELCA is violating both federal law and the Word of God in declaring itself a sanctuary church body. To make his point he quoted Romans 13:1ff: “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities.” Of course, the Word of God also says, in many places, that we are called to welcome, accompany, advocate for, and protect those who come from other places to live among us:

“Do not oppress a foreigner; you yourselves know how it feels to be foreigners, because you were foreigners in Egypt.” [Exodus 23:9]

“For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in.” [Matthew 25:35]

“The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.” [Leviticus 19:34]

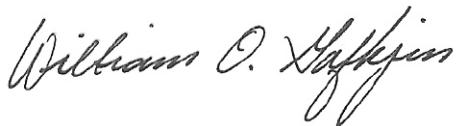
“Do no wrong to the resident alien.” [Jeremiah 22:3]

Ministries of welcome, advocacy, accompaniment, and protection for refugees and other immigrants are rooted in God’s Word and enlivened by the Spirit of Jesus. Freed in Christ crucified and risen, **we are sent to love our neighbors as Jesus has loved us.** We disagree with one another about how that love is expressed in the context of a dysfunctional immigration system and in light of the vulnerability of many refugees and immigrants among us. We also disagree with one another about whether, how, and when to resolve the tension between the call to “be subject to governing authorities” and the call to invite the stranger in and to “do no wrong to the resident alien.”

Nevertheless, the call to love the neighbor is so central to our faith that each of us in our local contexts are called to figure out how God is calling us to embody this love as individuals and as communities of faith and witness. We engage this discernment in deep and honest discussion, debate, prayer, study, and discernment with our siblings across the community, the synod, and the church. We do so centered in Jesus Christ crucified and risen for the life of the world. In the end, as one bishop has put it, “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.”

Dear people of God, I invite you to take a moment to breathe deeply of the presence of God in this and so many other significant and challenging situations. Then, gather with others in whatever ways are most appropriate in your context to study and discuss these resources, dwell in scripture together, pray with and for one another with openness to the movement of the Spirit in your life together, and to seek wisdom about how you as individuals and as a community might grow, deepen, and expand your love of your neighbors, whoever they are. And, along the way, “Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.” [1 John 4:7]

Peace be with you,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "William O. Gafkjen". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, stylized 'W' at the beginning.

Rev. Dr. William O. Gafkjen, Bishop