



Southwestern Washington Synod

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

The Rev. Richard E. Jaech, Bishop

April 19, 2017

A Special Letter regarding Care for Refugees and Immigrants – from Bishop Rick Jaech

How should we respond to the refugees and immigrants already among us, as well as those seeking to enter the United States? That issue is being debated in courthouses, in state and federal halls of congress, and in every media outlet. It is also being discussed in many churches. During the past months, a number of our Synod congregations have contacted the Synod Office asking for advice or background information that will help them discuss and discern their role with refugees and immigrants. I would like to offer a few of my thoughts on this matter, together with some links to more detailed resources and information.

I want to start by acknowledging that within our Synod and among our church members there are many different opinions about the issue of refugees and immigrants. In other words, we do not all agree about this matter. There are multiple, complex factors that we wrestle with, such as national safety, international suffering, effective policy and Christian compassion. Within our Synod and our nation, we will need to engage in continuing dialogue and respectful debate in order to fully address this question. Therefore, I do not claim to speak for everyone and, in fact, would like to hear your thoughts on this matter and learn from you. In this letter, I would like to offer my views, which also represent recent statements by our church body, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). (See the ELCA Social Message on Immigration at <http://www.elca.org/Faith/Faith-and-Society/Social-Messages/Immigration>)

Jesus said to them, "... I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me..." Matthew 25:35

Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS)

There are 21 million people in the world today that have fled from their homes because of warfare, violence or persecution. Over half of these refugees are children under the age of 18. Ever since World War II, when 1 in 6 Lutherans in the world were themselves homeless refugees, our Lutheran congregations in the United States have actively welcomed and cared for refugees from around the world. Through the work of Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS), we US Lutherans have welcomed over 500,000 refugees into our communities. During this last year, 2016, we sponsored and welcomed close to 29,000 refugees fleeing violence in Africa, the Middle East and Central America. I believe that care for refugees and

420 121st St S Tacoma, WA 98444 • 253-535-8300 • swwsynod@plu.edu • www.lutheranssw.org

The mission of the Southwestern Washington Synod is to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ by empowering congregations and Church leaders to grow in worship, education, outreach, stewardship and other ministries.

immigrants is an important ministry that we should continue. This includes special care for those who are being attacked for their religious faith, such as Muslim, Sikh and Jewish people who live in our communities. Even as we want Christian minority groups to be protected and kept safe around the world, we should protect and keep safe people of all faiths in our country.

In our national conversation, the concern is often raised that letting in refugees will expose us to terrorists wanting to do violence in our country. I fully support maintaining safeguards and adequate precautions that keep dangerous people out. It is important to know, however, that refugees brought to the US by Lutheran Immigration and other immigration service agencies have spent 18-24 months in monitored refugee camps, where they are interviewed and vetted. Before receiving a visa to enter, each refugee must be interviewed, researched and approved by seven federal US agencies, including the Department of Defense and Homeland Security.

For a closer look at the ministry of LIRS and how to be involved, I recommend that you go to their website at <http://www.lirs.org>

AMMPARO

A more specific refugee question is how to respond to the children and families from Central America who are seeking refuge in the United States after traveling up through Mexico. Daily, life-threatening violence takes place in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras due to drug gangs and corrupt officials in every neighborhood and city. Young boys and girls are especially vulnerable. Their lives are daily in danger, which compels parents to seek a safe place for them to live, often with relatives in the United States.

The ELCA has established a ministry called AMMPARO that helps these families and children. AMMPARO stands for Accompanying Migrant Minors with Protection, Advocacy, Representation and Opportunities. In Spanish, the word *amparo* means “help” or “rescue”. ELCA members and congregations who wish to work with AMMPARO can choose to do ministry in any of these three ways:

Accompaniment: providing aid to refugees when they arrive in the United States in the form of legal assistance, education, orientation to a new culture, and resources as they move through a legal process as refugees. An example of this within our Synod is AID Northwest, an ecumenical ministry located at the Immigration Detention Center in the Port of Tacoma. AID NW ministers to refugees and immigrants being released from detention and the families of those still detained.

Awareness-building: learning and sharing information about why refugees risk leaving their homes to travel to another country. What is going on in their country that is forcing them out?

Advocacy: addressing the root causes of refugee migration, including changes in US foreign policy and international aid.

For more information about AMMPARO, see <http://www.elca.org>, then click on Resources and then click the box that says AMMPARO.

Sanctuary

A number of Synod congregations have contacted the Synod office asking for information about being a Sanctuary congregation. The word “sanctuary” first brings to mind a church giving shelter within their place of worship to a person sought by legal authorities. Throughout the middle ages, Christian churches that had a red-painted door were known to be places of sanctuary. However, no country today, including the United States, provides legal permission for a church to deny entrance to a legal authority looking for someone who is suspected of having committed an illegal act. Therefore, a congregation that is considering whether to give shelter to a person who is at risk of deportation should first consult with an attorney to research all of the specific legal considerations.

Currently, many congregations in the United States are considering what it means to be a sanctuary congregation in a broader sense. This may include:

- Making a public statement that all are welcome at your place of worship, regardless of immigration status, and that your congregation will lend assistance to all those in need.
- Speaking out in behalf of immigrants’ rights; expressing support for keeping families together; and working to reform immigration laws that help undocumented immigrants more readily acquire a lawful status.
- Referring undocumented immigrants (or all persons your congregation is serving) to legal assistance resources, including pro bono immigration legal help; holding legal information sessions; hosting legal clinics; and making referrals for social services.

There are a variety of ways in which you might serve the refugee and immigrant community, if you feel called by God to do this ministry. We welcome you to contact the Synod Office for more detailed resources regarding the sanctuary ministry. We also believe that this is a ministry that a number of our Synod congregations could do more effectively together, in partnership with other ecumenical and inter-religious congregations as well. If you would like to be part of a team that further develops these ministry possibilities, please let us know.

We now celebrate Christ’s Easter victory over death and all the forces that hold us captive and half-alive. I pray that Christ will work to enliven our faith, our hope, and the ministry we do each day, including our care for the most vulnerable among us.

In Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Richard E. Jaech". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Bishop Rick Jaech