

AMMPARO

Accompanying Migrants with Protection, Advocacy, Representation and Opportunities

Overview of the Sanctuary Movement

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. Started 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 for communities of faith to walk alongside immigrants in the U.S.

While there is no uniform definition of sanctuary, its overall purpose is to faithfully and openly act to ensure that all feel safe and welcomed. The ways in which sanctuary is provided varies by congregation, but it can include providing physical shelter to a community member at risk of deportation, inviting and welcoming all to worship regardless of immigration status, providing services to migrants, responding to raids or other emergencies, aiding all regardless of immigration status and actively advocating for migrants. These activities are completely legal and are born of our faith traditions.

One controversial activity that some sanctuary congregations engage in is physically hosting a community member at risk of deportation. While there are varied views as to the interpretation of the law, knowingly concealing, harboring, or shielding (or attempting to conceal, harbor, or shield) an undocumented immigrant from detection by the authorities is illegal. Similarly, 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 U.S. unlawfully, violates the law. Congregations or individuals that engage in legally controversial practices often view their actions as civil disobedience — knowingly violating a law to shine a light on its injustice. Civil disobedience also has an important and rich history in faith traditions all over the world, but civil disobedience includes accepting the consequences that naturally flow from breaking the law.

Thus, sanctuary is a broad term that is applied to a variety of practices, most of which are legal.

ELCA sanctuary timeline

Lutherans have a long history of standing alongside immigrants and refugees through church ministries or by connecting with Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS).

Congregations in predecessor bodies of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) were essential in the sanctuary movement during the 1980s. Today, ELCA congregations, including Angelica Lutheran Church in Los Angeles and Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd in Brooklyn, N.Y., have independently joined the New Sanctuary Movement through their local networks. Notably, Augustana Lutheran Church in Portland, Ore., gave sanctuary in 2014 to Francisco Aguirre, a migrant from El Salvador facing deportation. Currently at least two ELCA congregations, and probably more, are providing sanctuary. Recently, Gethsemane Lutheran, Seattle, saw Jose Robles, who has been in sanctuary in its church for almost a year, taken into custody following an U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement check-in appointment.

In response to the increasing numbers of unaccompanied children arriving to this country starting in 2011, the 2016 ELCA Churchwide Assembly passed the [AMMPARO \(Accompanying Migrant Minors with Protection, Advocacy, Representation and Opportunities\)](#) strategy. AMMPARO recommits the church to accompanying migrant children and families in the U.S., in the countries of origin and in transit. Through AMMPARO, ELCA churches can become Welcoming Congregations by committing to accompanying migrants in their community through service and advocacy. While there is no central database of individual sanctuary churches, those wanting to tap into the AMMPARO network have been welcomed to do so by joining the list of Welcoming Congregations without having to take additional steps.

In May 2016, shortly before the AMMPARO strategy was adopted, the Oregon Synod passed a resolution declaring itself the first sanctuary synod in the ELCA. This resolution, which called on the ELCA to become a sanctuary denomination, was memorialized at the 2016 Churchwide Assembly. In May 2019, the Metropolitan New York Synod, itself a sanctuary synod, memorialized the 2019 Churchwide Assembly to declare itself a sanctuary church body. The 2019 Churchwide Assembly adopted a modified version of this memorial on Aug. 7.

Sanctuary synods and congregations in the ELCA

During the 2017 assembly season, four additional synods declared themselves sanctuary synods: Sierra Pacific, Southwest California, New England, and Metropolitan New York (through its Synod Council). All four synods, together with the Oregon Synod, relate to AMMPARO. Further, there are ELCA congregations that have declared themselves sanctuary congregations and also consider themselves part of the AMMPARO network.

Research on sanctuary in other denominations: Summary of findings

To understand the realities and implications of sanctuary, ELCA Advocacy interviewed staff responsible for articulating the movement and equipping churches in their contexts. ELCA Advocacy interviewed staff from the United Methodist Church (UMC), the Episcopal Church, and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The interviews took place in June 2017 and were recently updated.

Overall, we found that the none of the three churches are sanctuary denominations, but they all encourage their congregations to make their own decisions regarding their involvement with sanctuary. For the UMC, any policies and laws attempting to limit or restrain its work of responding to the needs of others are contrary to its most fundamental beliefs as stated in the gospel. According to Resolution 6028 (adopted in 2008), the church's response to migration assistance includes recognizing "the right of sanctuary in any United Methodist local church for migrants subject to detention or deportation by government security forces." The UMC urges churches and members to commit to opposing these types of laws and encourages congregations to prayerfully choose to affirm the New Sanctuary Movement. In practice, this means disseminating resources to congregations that want to know how to become sanctuaries and continuing the UMC Immigration Task Force, which works on action and analysis of the policy realities affecting migrants.

The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has supported congregations and members participating in the Sanctuary Movement since its inception in the 1980s. The church states it will open congregations and communities as sanctuary spaces for those targeted by hate, to ensure the human rights of all people. The denomination has not declared sanctuary status, but supports congregations in doing so as witness on the behalf of immigrants. In 2016, a resolution was passed reaffirming the ministry of sanctuary and the support of congregations that have provided sanctuary for immigrants and refugees. The resolution also calls for congregations and individuals to advocate and organize "for humanitarian, just immigration policies on the local, state, and federal levels." Through this, the Presbyterian Church provides resources, including legal resources, to help individuals be informed on how to assist. Most of the pushback received on the resolution language has been a minority voice.

The Episcopal Church's most recent resolution in 2018, titled "Becoming a Sanctuary Church," affirms the New Sanctuary Movement; urges its members to advocacy for unjust policies; recommends that its congregations be places of sanctuary; encourages its members to connect with local sanctuary movements; and, as a church body, calls for advocacy for such things as comprehensive immigration reform. The church encourages dioceses and congregations to commit to protecting migrants but, similarly to the UMC and Presbyterian Church, does not declare itself a sanctuary denomination. In practice, the extent to which the

dioceses commit to the recent resolution vary, but Los Angeles and New Jersey dioceses for example, have declared themselves sanctuary dioceses.

In conclusion, while none of the ELCA's full communion partners in this report have become a sanctuary denomination, at least three support the New Sanctuary Movement overall. As in the ELCA memorial, the decision on how congregations and individuals would like to participate is up to the discretion of each synod and congregation.

Conclusions and next steps

The ELCA, in all its expressions, has a long-documented history of standing alongside migrants and refugees. Recognizing that our confidence in God's grace leads us to engage immigration issues differently, and that in a political climate where migrants and refugees are aggressively targeted for deportation and depicted often as security threats, it is imperative for all faith communities to be vocal about our belief that people are created in God's image, worthy of dignity and safety. Sanctuary has been an interfaith expression of the commitment of faith communities to welcome the stranger.

The ELCA already has a number of pathways for churches and congregants to provide services, advocate, and welcome immigrants through synod immigration task forces, AMMPARO, and LIRS. Synod task forces, LIRS, AMMPARO, and formal churchwide actions already call on churches to walk alongside migrants and become part of a Lutheran network working with migrant communities in different capacities. To complement these networks, the ELCA has now expressed its support for sanctuary and is calling on churches to be involved in activities to protect migrants through our existing networks.

Through ELCA AMMPARO, we:

1. Encourage ELCA congregations and synods to learn about and support the New Sanctuary Movement in their area, which is often manifest as an ecumenical or interfaith effort.
2. Provide educational and practical resources and information for congregations as they consider their part in providing sanctuary, including ways for them to understand possible legal risks.
3. Gather the five sanctuary synods in consultation with AMMPARO, learn from them and find best practices that can guide the ELCA as a sanctuary denomination.
4. Encourage synod immigration task forces and AMMPARO groups to be engaged with the movement in their area and accompany the work on local migrant community organizations.
5. Call on all congregations, including current sanctuary congregations, to support the spirit of the New Sanctuary Movement by serving the migrant communities around them, becoming [Welcoming Congregations](#) and/or sanctuary congregations, and joining the [AMMPARO movement](#). There is a place for everyone in AMMPARO!