



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America Sanctuary Memorial FAQ

1- How was the sanctuary memorial adopted by the 2019 Churchwide Assembly?

The ELCA Churchwide Assembly, as the highest legislative authority of the ELCA and the primary decision-making body of the church, properly followed its procedures and protocol in adopting this memorial. Memorials and resolutions enable this church to address broad policy issues or issues important to God's mission in the world. Memorials address broad policy issues; resolutions have a narrower focus, requesting consideration or action by individual offices or units, or the Church Council. (A resolution can be the preferred method when an issue requires a timely response.) The churchwide organization and synods of the ELCA use a [process](#) to bring forth memorials and resolutions.

Each synod elects voting members during its respective synod assembly per the ELCA constitution. Voting members for the 2019 Churchwide Assembly were elected at the 2018 synod assemblies.

At synod assemblies, voting members not only vote on resolutions for their synods but can also memorialize the next Churchwide Assembly to take certain actions. In the case of the Sanctuary Memorial, it was first presented to the Metropolitan New York Synod Assembly in May 2019 and was approved by a majority of the synod's voting members to be passed on to the 2019 Churchwide Assembly. The Sanctuary Memorial was distributed to all voting members before the assembly. It was reviewed by the Memorials Committee, and a recommendation was made by the committee. The memorial received several amendments from the floor of the assembly, and it was adopted by the Churchwide Assembly voting members by a majority vote. The text of this memorial can be found [here](#).

2- Does this memorial mandate action by ELCA congregations?

No, this memorial does not mandate any action, but actions that a congregation should consider taking can be found in the document entitled "Basics on Sanctuary."

3- Does sanctuary call for any illegal action or activity?

No, sanctuary does not call for any person, congregation or synod, or the churchwide expression, to engage in any illegal actions. The ways in which sanctuary may be provided varies throughout the church, but it may include housing someone in sanctuary, 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. For information on legal aspects of sanctuary, please see the ACLU document “Sanctuary Congregations and Harboring FAQ,” available online. Additional information is available from the [ELCA Greater Milwaukee Synod](#) and the [United States Department of Justice](#).

Each congregation that considers sanctuary should get legal advice before making that decision.

For some congregations, “sanctuary” may mean walking with migrants in the community through hosting English as a second language (ESL) classes; for others it may mean marching as people of faith against the detention of children and families; and in still others it could mean having thoughtful conversations about what our faith says about immigration and then responding to the call of the gospel. All of these actions are a step closer to sanctuary in our faith communities and sanctuary in our world for people who must leave their homes.

While the ELCA has not fully defined the scope of the work that this declaration will open for this church in each of the three expressions, we do know that our faith communities and some of our synods are already doing sanctuary work.

4- What do the Bible and the church say about sanctuary?

God has called us to love our neighbor, whoever they may be. We believe that Christ’s church is for all people. God calls each of us by name and does not sort, divide, categorize or exclude anyone. While there is no legal definition of sanctuary, its overall purpose is to faithfully and openly act to ensure that all feel safe and welcomed. Churches have been providing sanctuary for centuries.

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. For many years the ELCA has advocated for stopping the detention of children and families. We have spoken out against family separation, sought a pathway to citizenship for community members who have lived in the United States for many years, resettled refugees and taken steps to address the root

causes of migration in a way that honors the humanity in people who are forced to flee. For more information about the ELCA's theological grounding on immigration, please read the [social message "Immigration."](#)

5- Why are people leaving their countries to come to the United States?

Since biblical times, people have been on the move. The Bible is a book of stories of migrants and refugees! Lutherans are no strangers to the accompaniment of migrants and refugees. Following World War II, Lutherans settled 57,000 refugees and migrants in the United States and have continued this work since then. Accompaniment and advocacy on behalf of migrants did not commence with the change in U.S. administration in 2017, as some may think. ELCA congregations and synods have engaged in this work for decades.

In instances when governments are unable to protect their citizens from gang or other violence or when a government perpetrates violence upon its people, individuals and families find it necessary to flee from their homes in order to save their lives. These have been and still are frequently the circumstances in the Northern Triangle countries of Central America: El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala. Often people will attempt to seek safety within their own countries before undertaking the migrant journey. But when they find no safe place, people are forced to flee. People who must seek protection outside of their countries are asylum-seekers or refugees. Some people also leave their communities to ensure that they or their families can access food, health care and other basic necessities.

At the 2016 ELCA Churchwide Assembly, we committed to walking alongside these Central American children and families fleeing their communities, passing the [AMMPARO](#) strategy (Accompanying Migrant Minors with Protection, Advocacy, Representation and Opportunities). Through the AMMPARO strategy, we are working through our global partners in Central America to alleviate the conditions that cause people to migrate. We support churches and organizations that work with deported and returned migrants in Central America and advocate for the humane treatment of migrants in Mexico.

In the United States, we have a growing network of 182 welcoming and sanctuary congregations that are committed to accompanying migrants in their communities and working for justice on migration issues. The church also has five sanctuary synods and many AMMPARO synods or synods with immigration task forces, all of which work with immigrants, refugees and asylum-seekers.

6- Are all immigrants “illegal”? What does it mean to request asylum? Is it illegal to enter the United States and request asylum?

In the eyes of God, no human being is illegal. For the purpose of U.S. immigration law, some people might not have proper authorization to live and work in the United States. This population is often referred to as “undocumented.” A significant number of people who are undocumented in the United States entered the country with a valid visa but have overstayed that visa. According to this [National Public Radio report](#), visa overstays have exceeded illegal border crossings for seven consecutive years.

The majority of these community members have lived in the United States for more than a decade and make economic, cultural and other contributions to our communities. Many also have children who are U.S. citizens. To separate them from their children and the lives that they have made in this country will cause irreparable harm to our communities.

Most recent arrivals in the United States who have fled from violence in their home countries are seeking asylum because they have a well-founded [fear of persecution](#) due to their race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group. [Read](#) more about the factors that contribute to immigration from Central America.

Their own governments are either unwilling or unable to protect them. The principal difference between a [refugee and an asylum-seeker](#) is whether they are going through the process of seeking protection inside the destination country (asylum-seeker) or outside the destination country (refugee). While recent changes in U.S. policy have put barriers to how asylum seekers are able to request in the U.S., by definition the only way that one must seek asylum is to enter a different country and request it. It is not illegal to request asylum.

7- Do undocumented immigrants receive federal benefits?

Immigrants with temporary statuses or who are undocumented, including Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) holders, are [ineligible](#) to receive most federal public benefits, including means-tested benefits such as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, sometimes referred to as food stamps), regular Medicaid, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Federal Student Aid, and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). Undocumented immigrants are ineligible for health care subsidies under the Affordable Care Act (ACA) and are prohibited from purchasing unsubsidized health coverage on ACA exchanges. Undocumented immigrants may be eligible for a handful of benefits that are deemed necessary to protect life or guarantee safety in dire situations, such as emergency Medicaid, access to treatment in hospital emergency rooms, or access to

health care and nutrition programs under the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for [Women, Infants, and Children \(WIC\)](#). (Source: National Immigration Forum)

8- Were my ancestors considered “illegal” or “undocumented” when they immigrated? Why is our immigration system broken?

Except for our members whose ancestors were here before European settlement or others whose ancestors were forced to come to the United States against their will, the ELCA is an immigrant church. Immigration policy has radically changed in the last 25 years, and it is very likely that if our ancestors attempted to come to the United States today, most of them would be denied entrance.

Few immigration laws existed in the United States until the opening of Ellis Island in 1892. The United States Border Patrol was first created in 1924. Aside from the Naturalization Act of 1790 that granted citizenship to freed white persons of good moral character, the first Immigration and Nationality Act, which established grounds to block entry to the United States and provide for deportation, was adopted in 1952, less than 70 years ago. Since then, piecemeal changes have been made with advancement toward a serious effort at comprehensive immigration reform.

We now have a broken immigration system that has not adapted to our modern reality. As people of faith, it is incumbent upon us to seek justice for our neighbors whose families are being separated. To declare ourselves a sanctuary church body is to say that we seek to uphold the human dignity of those most vulnerable who are feeling the sharp edges of injustice from our broken system. Sanctuary is an immediate response to human need but is not a replacement for working on longer-term policy change.

9- How does sanctuary, a highly political and controversial term, help grow our church?

Sanctuary is a term that comes from religious traditions and historically has been owned by faith communities around the country. In the 1980s, when people were fleeing violence in Central America, churches in the United States were offering sanctuary to protect vulnerable people from being returned to violence. Public actions by churches, cities and states declaring sanctuary raised little controversy. It is only in the last several years that sanctuary cities have come under attack. For a history of sanctuary as well as statistics about some of the myths attempting to connect immigrants with crime, see *Sanctuary Cities: The Politics of Refuge* by Loren Collingwood and Benjamin Gonzalez O'Brien.

We are sharing the gospel as we develop relationships with our neighbors, accompanying them and advocating with them. Vital communities lead to vital congregations with many members. We must not be blind to the people around us and fail to see parts of the community of Christ, whether they are an immigrant community member, someone struggling with addiction in a rural community or a person thousands of miles away struggling to find medical care. Immigrant communities are a part of our church, not outside of it.

10-How does sanctuary express the ELCA commitments to promote racial justice and combat racism?

The church confesses that Christ has broken down the dividing wall (Ephesians 2:14). Christ, our peace, has put an end to the hostility of race, ethnicity, gender and economic class.

The ELCA social statement *Freed in Christ: Race, Ethnicity, and Culture*, calls us to name racism as sin. By definition, a racist is a person who shows or feels discrimination or prejudice against people of other races, or who believes that a particular race is superior to another. As Lutherans, we believe God has called us to love our neighbor, whoever they may be. We believe that Christ's church is for all people. God calls each of us by name and does not sort, divide, categorize or exclude anyone. This is where God has put us, in the thick of life, where we participate in what God is doing by insisting on justice and upholding human dignity for the inclusion of all people in the life of the church and society. To pursue justice, the church must address how racism affects society, political decisions and economic forces as well as individual lives. Therefore, *Freed in Christ* also calls us to advocate for just immigration policies.

The Sanctuary Memorial, together with the other actions adopted at the 2019 Churchwide Assembly (including the [resolution](#) to commemorate June 17 as a day of repentance in the ELCA for the martyrdom of the Emanuel Nine and the [“Strategy Toward Authentic Diversity in the ELCA”](#)), give all ELCA congregations and members the opportunity to examine our attitudes and biases to help us work toward the elimination of all forms of bias and discrimination in ourselves, our churches, our communities and our world.

This church has often addressed white members about the urgency of addressing racism and white supremacy. We have done so because our mission and ministry are in a society where white people have been favored and hold unequal power to implement their prejudices—socially, politically and economically. What has been the case is still the case: skin color makes a difference, and white people benefit from a privileged position.

Racism, however, infects and affects everyone. It deforms relationships between and within racial, ethnic or cultural groups. It undermines the promise of community and exacerbates prejudice and unhealthy competition among these groups. It robs white people of the possibility of authentic relationships with people of color, and people of color of the possibility of authentic relationships with white people.

Racism also can lead to the rejection of self, as when white people internalize guilt or people of color internalize values associated with white culture. It hinders us from becoming who God calls us to be (ELCA social statement, *Freed in Christ: Race, Ethnicity, and Culture*, p. 4).

ELCA Downloadable Resources:

[“Troubling the Waters for Healing of the Church”](#)

[ELCA social statement, *Freed in Christ: Race, Ethnicity, and Culture*](#)

[“One Body, Many Members: A Journey for Christians Across Race, Culture and Class”](#)

[“Opening Our Hearts to ‘Welcome the Stranger,’”](#) blog post from Women of the ELCA