



Northeastern Minnesota Synod

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

1105 East Superior Street, Upper Suite • Duluth, Minnesota 55802-2216
218/724-4424 www.nemnsynod.org Fax: 218/724-4393

Pastoral Letter from +Bishop Tom Aitken August 2019

Dear Sisters and Brothers, claimed by Christ Jesus;

Our fifteen Northeastern Minnesota Synod Voting members, along with 950 plus others across the ELCA are to be commended for their faithful discernment, prayer and deliberations at the Churchwide Assembly in Milwaukee. In addition to my own comments on our Synod Website and Face Book page, and weekly Onlines, this church we belong to is reflecting on and in conversation about our worship, prayer, celebrations, Bible Study and significant work we did.

One of the decisions made was to declare the ELCA a Sanctuary Denomination. It was made the same day I, and 700 plus others from our Assembly walked to the Homeland Security Office to pray and protest inhumane treatment of refugee families. There was significant conversation surrounding this vote and I voted in favor of the resolution for reasons that have to do with who our ultimate loyalty belongs to, Jesus. There is a tremendous amount of thankfulness by many in our church over this, and there are those who are troubled by it – just like every time a Church Body comes together to speak publicly about how Christian faith might be lived out for the sake of the world. At this particular moment in the life of our Country, divided in more hurtful and back-biting ways that I've seen in my lifetime, it is especially important that the gospel which sets us free, the good news of Jesus Christ, the wonderfully “scandalous” love for all people – no exceptions, does not find its “light” under some “bushel” but placed in broad view, on the “lamp stand” for all to see.

(Our Lord's words in Matthew 5: 14-16)

Our Denomination, the ELCA, has been intelligently and faithfully involved in helping with immigration issues and refugee resettlement for 80 years. We are one of the “go-to” organizations our own Government turns to for help. Through LIRS (Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services) at the end of World War II, concrete help has been given to Lutherans and all others for resettlement. This is not a new thing for us, and pray it never will be! Our immigration system is broken and Congress seems incapable of fixing it. But the Body of Christ does not depend on any one person, or Government to do its calling in the world; Serve the neighbor with the same love God has served us.

We committed as a church to walk alongside families fleeing violence, through AMMPARO (Accompanying migrant Minors with Protection Advocacy and Opportunities) like the ones we have come to know personally through our own Synod's relationship with the Lutheran church in Honduras. I'm going with a delegation to Honduras again this October for accompaniment, relationship building, worship and sharing insights on Lutheran Ethics and Pastoral Care. We have come to know the truth – on the ground- that Central America families are running for their lives to our Country for safety.

I know some are confused by what has happened with the Sanctuary vote. The constant stream of today's social media fear and misinformation like that of the Fox News story after Assembly and growing America Hate Groups fueling White Supremacy doesn't help, but clouds Christ's claim on us. Lutherans can and should dialog about issues – we are good at that, knowing that no one can claim perfect answers to the issues of our day. But our framework is that of the Jesus, and his Gospel, nothing else. And that gospel does not allow for degrading people or ignoring refugee's dire plight or pretending there simply isn't "enough" for all to flourish in this world. We are still conversing together as a church concerning what being a Sanctuary Body will continue to mean for us because we've already been doing it for years. It does mean we will find ways to continue to advocate for refugees and asylum seekers in ministering to human need.

Again, The Churchwide Assembly did not call for any illegal actions, all actions mentioned by the Churchwide Assembly are legal and whether any person chooses to engage in civil disobedience (and therefore accept the consequences) is up to them; We are invited to think, pray, and talk together about how each of us will live out Christ, whom the Holy Spirit is forming in us daily. There will be various ways congregations and individuals will live into this decision. God's love has its way of working into our souls, when we know it, and even when we don't, thank God!

The passionate Danish Lutheran pastor, Kaj Munk, who was assassinated by the Nazis because of his commitment to Christ and the neighbor in WWII wrote these words that both cheer me and haunt me:

"...Remember, the signs of the Christian Church have been the Lion, the Lamb, the Dove and the Fish, but never the *chameleon*." We love, period. We love all because Christ has first loved us. That claim on our life doesn't change no matter what the difficult current social issue is.

In the Spirit of Luther who wrote in the Freedom of the Christian (1520):

"Behold from faith flows love that serves one's neighbor and takes no account of gratitude or ingratitude, praise or blame, gain or loss... because God's love makes us free"

+Bishop Thomas M. Aitken