

"Immigration"
A Message of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Adopted by the Church Council Nov. 16, 1998

How do we who are residents learn to welcome newcomers more graciously? As members of a church with immigrants and with roots in immigrant churches in a nation of immigrants, we are familiar with old and new stories about newcomers. We have heard how persons left their homes for economic or political reasons, journeyed into an uncertain future, and struggled in a strange land to begin a new life. There are stories of hardship, tragedy, courage, resourcefulness, and blessing. There are stories of hostile receptions and welcoming embraces, of tensions between immigrants and their children over how to live in a new culture, and of conflicts over what language to use in home and church. (Pg. 2)

Our church also has a history of hospitality for refugees. Following World War II, when one out of every six Lutherans in the world was a refugee or displaced person, Lutherans, with the participation of 6,000 congregations, resettled some 57,000 refugees in the United States. (Pg. 2)

We in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America minister with the most vulnerable of the newcomers through congregations and the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS). Where possible, we work ecumenically. Our ministry resettles refugees, advocates on behalf of detained asylum seekers, assists unaccompanied children, offers pastoral and legal counsel to persons without legal status, aides persons with the citizenship process, and helps newcomers learn to live in a new country. (Pg. 3)

Some congregations provide congregationally-based immigration services. They offer legal and para-legal advice and assistance to newcomers; even when the legal options are limited, their counsel keeps vulnerable people from becoming the victims of unscrupulous exploiters. These congregations offer English language courses and instruction on how to become a citizen. They help immigrants with housing, jobs, and health care. They accompany families with pastoral care and invite them into a worshiping community. They may look to other congregations for pro bono lawyers, teachers of English as a second language, nurses and doctors, and to secure other needed services. Lutheran child care centers and schools increasingly are serving newcomers. (Pg. 5)

Those who minister with vulnerable newcomers should not be isolated or disconnected from one another. In order to support and strengthen our church's ministry with immigrants, we encourage churchwide units to continue to work with congregations, synods, and Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service to provide opportunities for these pastors and lay leaders to learn from and support one another. (Pg. 5)

Advocating for Fair and Generous Laws

The following objectives, set forth in a 1969 statement of the Lutheran Council in the United States of America, have been important for Lutheran church bodies and

organizations for nearly forty years and have given content to our understanding of fair and generous immigration laws:

1. To admit to our permanent population a steady proportion of newcomers:

- a. by facilitating the reunification of families;
- b. by facilitating the entry of persons possessing special skills or other capacities needed by the American economy and culture;
- c. by assuming the United States' proper share of international responsibility for the resettlement of refugees and other persons urgently in need of the compassionate haven of a new homeland;
- d. by admitting persons who choose the United States as their new homeland and who impart to their American neighbors an understanding of the culture, attitude, and interests of other races and peoples of the world.

2. To admit annually a reasonable number of the persons described above on an objective basis of selection which, while discriminating, will not be discriminatory with respect to race, national origin, color, or religion, testifying thereby to the United States' recognition of the interlocking and mutual interests of all nations with regard to the migration of peoples, the interaction of cultures, and respect of universal human rights.

3. To provide reasonable access to nationality and citizenship for all immigrants admitted for permanent residence. (Pg. 6-7)

Newcomers without legal status

While most newcomers are legal permanent residents or naturalized citizens, a significant number of people, including many agricultural workers, lack legal documents. Many undocumented persons have been here for years. They live under the fear of deportation. Those who become eligible to adjust their status are only allowed to do so by leaving the United States and then waiting years to re-enter. They often fear returning to a troubled land, and if they were to return, it would mean for many indefinite separation from their families in the United States. The existence of a permanent sub-group of people who live without recourse to effective legal protection opens the door for their massive abuse and exploitation and harms the common good. We urge leaders and citizens to seek feasible responses to this situation that offer flexible and humane ways for undocumented persons who have been in this country for a specified amount of time to be able to adjust their legal status. (Pg. 8)

Border with Mexico

We recognize the right of all countries to control their borders and their duty to protect their citizens from the illegal entry of drugs and criminals. But we have serious doubts about the rightness and effectiveness of current policy to erect imposing barriers between the United States and Mexico. We support the search for alternatives to this policy that would more appropriately reflect the relationship of two friendly nations whose peoples and economies are increasingly interdependent. Whatever the policy, border enforcement should always respect the human dignity of persons attempting to cross the border.(Pg. 9)