

Steps to Joining ELCA's AMMPARO Network of Welcoming Congregations

First Lutheran Church, Lincoln, NE

Note: The following are the steps First Lutheran Church in Lincoln, NE took to join the ELCA's AMMPARO Network of Welcoming Congregations. This is just one of many ways.

December 2015

- First Lutheran Church adopted the following Welcome Statement: *“Each person is a unique creation of God and, through grace, is a child of God. The people of First Lutheran Church welcome all because God welcomes all, without regard for race or culture, sexual orientation, gender identity or relationship status, physical or mental challenges, imprisonment, addictions, socio-economic circumstances, or anything else that too often divides us. First Lutheran Church is a spiritual community that celebrates the gifts of God that can empower us to engage in the struggles of life, to care for each other, and to serve Christ where we work and live. Our unity is in Christ.”*
- This statement has driven our understanding of who we are as a community of faith engaged in the community.

February 2017

- First Lutheran Church provided space for various community groups to gather for a RefugeeLNK community meeting. There we learned about what different organizations were doing to accompany and aid our neighbors and community members who have experienced migration (refugees, asylum seekers, immigrants, etc.).

March 2017

- In the midst of new travel bans and increased political anti-immigrant rhetoric, we decided to consider joining the ELCA's AMMPARO Network of Welcoming Congregations.
- A motion was drafted for the Congregation Council to consider joining the network and discussed at length by the Executive Committee beforehand. At first, not everyone was in agreement on the motion and the legal jeopardy joining the network might cause.
- With the assurance that we would not be breaking or impeding any laws, we read and considered the information provided in the “Responding to Immigration Concerns: Some Guidelines for Church Workers” written by the Southwest California Synod of the ELCA (appendix 1).
- The draft motion became a final motion sponsored by both pastors and the Executive Committee and presented to the Congregation Council (appendix 2). At the Council meeting there were lots of questions, many of which were the same as those expressed during the Executive Committee meeting. After considerable conversation and debate, the vote to join the AMMPARO Network was unanimous.
- The AMMPARO paperwork was completed and submitted to the ELCA Churchwide Offices.

April 2017

- An article was written for the church newsletter (based on the wording of the motion) about the Council's vote to join the AMMPARO Network of Welcoming Congregations. The size of the article would postpone it to being published the following month.

- ELCA Social Message on Immigration was made available to Council and other interests members.

May 2017

- The AMMPARO article for the church newsletter was published.

June 2017

- We shared our experiences of becoming an AMMPARO Welcoming Congregation at the “Get AMPed Workshop” before the 2017 Nebraska Synod Assembly.

August-September 2017

- A press release written in Spanish and English about us being an AMMPARO Welcoming Congregation and sent to local media, educational institutions, cultural centers, non-profit organizations, and the Nebraska Synod.

October 2017

- During the stewardship season of the congregation, AMMPARO was added to the list of service-ministry opportunities on the discipleship plan (aka. Time and Talent Sheet).
- Regular communications about news happenings and advocacy alerts related to folks who experienced migration were shared with the newly formed AMMPARO Team.
- Participated in AMMPARO National Conference Call.

January 2018

- 10 people from the First Lutheran Church’s AMMPARO Team were trained to be ELCA AMMPARO Guardian Angels, 6 of whom have been to the juvenile immigration court in the Spring of 2018.
- Guardian Angels debriefed their training experience and congregational action items were created.
- Participated in AMMPARO National Conference Call.

Helpful resources

- <http://nebraskasynod.org/ministries/justice/ammparo.html>
- www.elca.org/ammparo
- www.elca.org/advocacy
- <http://www.elca.org/Faith/Faith-and-Society/Social-Messages/Immigration>

For more information or questions, please contact Pastor Justin Eller:
pastorjustin@flclincoln.org

Appendix 1

Responding to Immigration Concerns: Some Guidelines for Church Workers

Southwest California Synod

These guidelines address a few of the many questions that may be raised by church workers and others in ministries involving immigrant populations. As of the time of this writing, the guidelines appear to be consistent with current immigration law. However, given the rapidly changing nature of immigration law, the reader should not construe these guidelines as legal advice. Church workers are always encouraged to seek legal counsel in their own state.

1. A church worker may proclaim the Gospel and teach God's Word to immigrants regardless of their legal status. One may incorporate immigrants into the life and membership of the congregation.
2. One may also incorporate immigrants into the life of the parochial school. One may give undocumented immigrants and their children access to a Christian education in Lutheran schools, colleges, and seminaries of the church. There is no federal law that prohibits the admission of undocumented immigrants to private, not-for-profit, educational institutions of the church.
3. One may offer assistance to immigrants through the church's ministries of relief and mercy regardless of their legal status. One may assist the needy with food, clothing, shelter, medical assistance, and childcare. One may assist Lutheran churches in other countries from which undocumented immigrants come so that their church leaders might reach out to them with the Gospel and care for them through ministries of mercy in order that they might find paid and dignified work to support their families.
4. One may help immigrants gain legal status in the country. One may seek the advice of lawyers and advocacy groups to reunite families separated through enforcement of immigration laws, or to seek asylum for those individuals or families for whom there is a reasonable fear of death or persecution upon return to the country of origin.
5. A church worker is not required to investigate the legal status of immigrants attending the local congregation or parochial school. One is not required to report undocumented attendees to state authorities. Potential situations such as the following may constitute government intrusion into the church's work of spiritual care: the presence at worship of enforcement personnel looking for undocumented persons; the use of church property by enforcement personnel to stage a raid; a demand made to clergy by enforcement personnel to disclose information about members whose legal status has been disclosed to the pastor in the context of confession and absolution. The church is not the government and is not expected to engage in law enforcement activities. At the same time, one must encourage and help undocumented members of the body of Christ to fulfill the law in every way possible. In assisting them, one must also be prepared to exercise a good measure of patience in what can become a long, complex, and expensive process towards legalization.
6. One must not give undocumented immigrants paid employment at the church or school unless they are legally authorized to be employed in the United States. One may involve them in the life of the congregation on a legitimate volunteer basis (e.g., people serving as elders, musicians, assistant liturgists, or in outreach to the community).

7. A pastor must not share with civil authorities privileged and confidential information given to him by an undocumented immigrant member of the congregation in the context of confession and absolution or spiritual counseling. This includes the person's immigration status. The general principle that a pastor is not to divulge sins confessed to him so as not to break the ordination vow applies. Moreover, even in the broader context of pastoral care in the right-hand realm, the same general principle of confidentiality may apply since the undocumented member does not see or approach his pastor as any individual citizen in the left-hand realm but specifically as his pastor in the right-hand realm. The scope of the clergy/penitent privilege varies from state to state, so it is important to seek legal counsel if there is a question whether privilege applies to a particular communication.

8. If an undocumented immigrant is involved in criminal activities that actually put people's lives in danger, there is probable cause for calling the authorities to check into and deal with the threat. In such situations, however, the immediate issue is not the question of legal status per se but the life-endangering activities of the individual. Situations that may require contacting the authorities include knowledge of criminal activities such as terrorism, bulk cash smuggling/financial crimes, human smuggling, gang-related crime, weapons smuggling, child exploitation/pornography, narcotics smuggling, human trafficking (forced labor/slavery), and employment/exploitation of unlawful workers. In such cases where sharing vital information may help to save life, the principle of Christian love for the neediest neighbor applies.

9. In providing humanitarian assistance to undocumented immigrants, one must be careful not to transport them across the border into the U.S. One must not deal with "coyotes" (smugglers) and other criminal elements who ask for one's help to bring people across the border. Also, one must not willingly hide or conceal information from government authorities concerning immigrants who are in the U.S. illegally when specifically asked to share such information by investigating authorities. Concealing information from civil authorities is particularly problematic if, whether one knows it or not, an immigrant has a criminal record. One should always seek legal advice, especially when one finds oneself in potentially ambiguous legal situations.

Appendix 2

MEETING DATE: March 14, 2017

SUBJECT: ELCA AMMPARO - Welcoming Congregation

PROPOSED ACTION: That First Lutheran Church in Lincoln, NE join the ELCA Welcoming Congregations Network of AMMPARO (Accompanying Migrant Minors with Protection, Advocacy, Representation and Opportunities), becoming the first AMMPARO Welcoming Congregation in the Nebraska Synod.

BACKGROUND: ELCA Social Statement, "For Peace in God's World" (1995) states: *Care for the Uprooted. Tens of millions are refugees in foreign lands....In unprecedented numbers people have had to flee their homes because of persecution or general violence. We support compassionate survival assistance for refugees and vigorous international protection for them... In our own country, we support a generous policy of welcome for refugees and immigrants.*

In 2014, at the height of the public awareness of the global human migration crisis, several ELCA synods decided to partner and declare a joint commitment to welcome and minister to migrant guests, immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. Through their efforts, a network was formed of ELCA congregations who wanted to play a role in being a safe community for people who are scared and work together as Welcoming Congregations: *listening respectfully to their stories, praying for and sharing the gospel, providing emotional and spiritual support, helping facilitate local resources and services as needed, and advocating for justice for and with migrants, immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers.*

AMMPARO Welcoming Congregations commit to:

- welcome and minister to migrant guests and identify a contact person in the congregation who speaks basic Spanish.
- attend occasional meetings of the Welcoming Congregations Network in the synod for mutual support, fellowship and training (we would be the first in the NE Synod).
- remain updated on the current situation of migration of children and families and receive policy updates.
- advocate for public policy that will positively impact the current immigration crisis.

Welcoming Congregations do not act in violation of federal law concerning "the bringing in and harboring of certain aliens" as delineated in Immigration and Nationality Act 274. (see end note)

Reasons for becoming an AMMPARO Welcoming Congregation include:

1. Our welcoming is grounded in scripture (*For 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. -Mt 25:35*).
2. Becoming an AMMPARO Welcoming Congregation is consistent with the Welcome Statement adopted by Council in December, 2015.
3. Becoming a Welcoming Congregation does not require a commitment by the whole congregation, but rather a commitment by the pastor(s) and a small team of members.
4. FLC already has a history of being willing to be a church home for refugees and immigrants; this is us being who we already are, just in a publicly recognized way.

5. FLC is becoming known in the wider community for our participation in strategies to network care and resources for refugees and immigrants.

COST: N/A

SPONSOR: Rev. Justin Eller, with the full support of Rev. Dan Warnes and the Executive Committee

APPENDIX: AMMPARO Letter to congregations considering becoming a Welcoming Congregation.

END NOTE: Immigration and Nationality Act 274 - Bringing in and harboring certain aliens, Sec. 274. [8 U.S.C. 1324]¹

(a) Criminal Penalties.-

(1) (A) Any person who-

(i) knowing that a person is an alien, brings to or attempts to bring to the United States in any manner whatsoever such person at a place other than a designated port of entry or place other than as designated by the Commissioner, regardless of whether such alien has received prior official authorization to come to, enter, or reside in the United States and regardless of any future official action which may be taken with respect to such alien;

(ii) knowing or in reckless disregard of the fact that an alien has come to, entered, or remains in the United States in violation of law, transports, or moves or attempts to transport or move such alien within the United States by means of transportation or otherwise, in furtherance of such violation of law;

(iii) knowing or in reckless disregard of the fact that an alien has come to, entered, or remains in the United States in violation of law, conceals, harbors, or shields from detection, or attempts to conceal, harbor, or shield from detection, such alien in any place, including any building or any means of transportation;

(iv) encourages or induces an alien to come to, enter, or reside in the United States, knowing or in reckless disregard of the fact that such coming to, entry, or residence is or will be in violation of law, shall be punished as provided in subparagraph (B); or

(v) 1/ (I) engages in any conspiracy to commit any of the preceding acts, or

(II) aids or abets the commission of any of the preceding acts

¹ <https://www.uscis.gov/ilink/docView/SLB/HTML/SLB/0-0-0-1/0-0-0-29/0-0-0-8381.html>



AMMPARO

Accompanying Migrant Minors with Protection, Advocacy, Representation and Opportunities

Welcoming Congregations

WELCOMING CONGREGATIONS:

In obedience to Matthew 25:35, Welcoming Congregations agree to welcome migrant children and families, listen to their stories with respect to receive the divine blessings that they bring, pray for and share the gospel, provide emotional and spiritual support, accompany migrants to access local and institutional services as needed and advocate for justice for and with migrant families and children.

SAMPLE LETTER

Dear ELCA congregation leadership:

I am writing to invite you to participate in the ELCA Welcoming Congregations Network of AMMPARO (Accompanying Migrant Minors with Protection, Advocacy, Representation and Opportunities). The network was initiated by the Southwest California Synod in response to a declaration of a joint commitment to migrant ministry signed by the ELCA bishops of the companion synods with the church in El Salvador and has now expanded to other ELCA synods.

Welcoming Congregations make a commitment to:

- welcome and minister to migrant guests and identify a contact person in the congregation who speaks enough Spanish for basic communication;
- attend occasional meetings of the Welcoming Congregations Network in your synod for mutual support, fellowship and training;
- participate in conference calls to be updated on the current situation of migration of children and families and receive policy updates; and
- advocate for public policy that will positively impact the current immigration crisis – including working in partnership with the ELCA Washington Office and Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service on immigration reform.

Becoming a Welcoming Congregation does not require a commitment by the whole congregation but rather a commitment by the pastor and a small team of members. Welcoming Congregations are not offering shelter or employment but merely are willing to be a church home for migrant children and families in the same way that congregations of several generations ago welcomed Lutheran migrants from Europe and helped them navigate life in their new home.

Joining the Welcoming Congregations Network provides congregations with a concrete and feasible strategy for connecting local and global mission while increasing their witness and capacity for ministry to the immigrant community. It is also a powerful way to respond to God's call in Matthew 25 – to welcome our Lord Jesus as he comes to us in the stranger.

The ELCA AMMPARO website and Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service also offer a wide variety of biblical and practical educational resources on immigration, including information on immigration policy and reform efforts. Information on the legal right of congregations to minister to and with undocumented individuals and families is available upon request.

I hope that you will prayerfully consider participating in this effort. For further information, contact: Mary Campbell, mary.campbell@elca.org, AMMPARO convenor.

AMMPARO Executive Committee

WELCOMING CONGREGATION COMMITMENT

We agree to:

- provide a contact person with a working knowledge of Spanish to offer the initial welcome, pray for the guest and introduce the guest to the congregation;
- pray for the children and families;
- provide a description of our ministries for a guidebook;
- refer guests as needed to medical, legal and pastoral resources; and
- prayerfully consider participation in ELCA advocacy.

Contact person: _____

Name: _____

Contact information: _____

Name of congregation: _____

Description of congregation and its ministries: _____

Pastor's signature: _____