

Pastor' Corner October 2019

I assume this is common knowledge to all of you, but just in case, St. Luke's is a congregation within the denomination known as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the ELCA. The ELCA consists of nearly 4 million members nationwide, and is one of the largest Lutheran denominations in the world. It is also one of the largest Protestant denominations in the United States.

We are a very diverse church, with members from literally every facet of society you can think of. We are multiracial, multicultural, and from all points along the political spectrum. We come from many backgrounds and places, we are urban and rural and small town. We are rich and poor and everything in between. We are different and diverse in so many ways, and yet we are united as one through our baptism into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We find our strength in our diversity, even as we all share the same faith in Jesus Christ.

We are active in the lives of our members, and in the life of the communities we gather and live in. We are leaders in providing help to the needy and suffering wherever they may be, and whoever they may be. We seek to follow the call of Jesus to be his hands and feet and body and heart and eyes in the world. We provide a loving welcome to all who come to us, and to all whom we go out to serve.

For all that we do, for all the good that we accomplish, for all the ministry that we provide, we are rarely in the news. But this past August, we made some headlines, and here is why.

At the 2019 Churchwide Assembly, held in Milwaukee, WI (think of it as a week-long congregational meeting on a national

scale), among many other actions, the ELCA voted overwhelmingly to declare itself a Sanctuary Denomination. This decision was made after much discussion and conversation among the delegates, and was not decided lightly or in the heat of the moment. But it was also a decision that has caused some confusion and even misunderstanding, both within and outside of the ELCA.

To help us be clearer about what it means for the ELCA to be a sanctuary denomination, I want to share with you a few points from the ELCA about this decision (and I will be quoting from an ELCA document here).

- 1) In its simplest form, becoming a sanctuary denomination means that the ELCA is publicly declaring that walking alongside immigrants and refugees is a matter of faith. When we preach on Sunday that Jesus told us to welcome, we will use our hands and voices on Monday to make sure it happens.
- 2) Being a sanctuary denomination does not call for any person, congregation, or synod to engage in any illegal actions.
- 3) We have a broken system of immigration, refugees and asylum-seekers. To declare ourselves a sanctuary church body is to say that we seek to provide concrete resources to assist the most vulnerable who are feeling the sharp edges of this broken system.
- 4) Being a sanctuary denomination is about loving our neighbors. While we may have different ideas about how to fix this broken system and may have different ways of loving our neighbors, our call to love our neighbor is central to our faith.

- 5) Being a sanctuary denomination will look different in different contexts. We cannot mandate or direct our congregations and ministries to respond in specific ways. Each must work out what this means for them in their context.
- 6) Being a sanctuary denomination means that we, as church together, want to be public and vocal about this work. At the same time, we will have conversations about what sanctuary means with many of our members and discern future action and direction. Welcoming people is not a political issue, it is a matter of faith.

That's not all that the ELCA has said, but it gives us all a good sense of where this decision is intending for us to go. But it also does not bind this congregation, or any other person, congregation or synod, to any specific actions. Mostly what we are called to do is discuss, discern, and dialogue, about how we can best be a place of welcome for all people without exception, and how we can best work together to heal what is broken, find new and better ways to help the most vulnerable in our world, and at all times work for the good of all people as we witness to the unconditional love of God for all people.

We have always been a congregation that has been generous in our help for the needy among us. That should not, and will not change, because we are people of a good and loving heart. We are a people who have always found ways to lift up those who have been pushed down for any reason. We already do so many generous and loving things to help the poor, the hungry, the lost, and the weary.

We are being challenged to explore how our acknowledged love for God's neediest children can now be made real for those who genuinely seek to find escape, refuge, hope, and a new life in the United States. How can we be the land of hope and freedom and opportunity we have always been, while also assuring that all who live here and come here, are free to live in safety and peace?

The ELCA has opened the door for much needed conversation here at St. Luke's, and throughout the whole of our church across the country. Even as we have a diversity of thoughts and opinions on how to be a place of welcome, we also all share the common calling of our faith to love our neighbor and be that place of welcome God calls us to be. I want to invite all of us, in settings both formal and informal, to calmly and in a spirit of Christian love, to talk about this sanctuary denomination idea, and how it might have meaning for us. I also invite all of us to have conversations about we, here at St. Luke's, can grow in our already strong commitment to love our neighbor and be a place of loving welcome for all. See you in church.

Peace,

Pr. Paul