



# Welcoming Immigrants and Refugees

~ Larry Otteman Council President-elect

## Should we welcome immigrants, asylum seekers and refugees?

Bethesda is at the point of discerning whether to say “yes” to the above question and we want to review the process that has led to this decision.

## This is the first I have heard of this. What is going on?

In a busy and committed church like ours, it is not unusual for news to travel slowly or not at all—despite our best efforts. We began in August 2019 when the ELCA voted to become a sanctuary denomination.

## What does “sanctuary denomination” mean?

It means that the ELCA is publicly declaring that walking alongside immigrants and refugees is a matter of faith not politics. It does NOT call for any person, congregation, or synod to engage in any illegal action such as hiding undocumented immigrants or asylum seekers.

## What has been done so far in terms of education and discernment?

A letter went out to all members of Bethesda in September 2019 and VOYAGER forums were held in October 2019 to answer questions about Bethesda’s role. A ministry team was formed at the same time, and we joined the Ames Sanctuary Interfaith Partnership (ASIP). Education and discernment resumed in April 2021 when Pastors Bryan and Ryan led a six-week bible study on immigration and refugees. The ASIP Ministry Team updated the Council in August and then met one on one with several members of the church. Another three-week Voyager forum based on material from Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS) was held in October.

## What does it mean to becoming a welcoming congregation for immigrants and refugees? Do we need to write a new welcoming statement already?

In our present welcoming statement, we speak to the world outside our church walls. We make people aware of our commitment and welcome. But we can’t speak a new commitment to immigrants and refugees directly. They won’t hear us. We need to make this commitment to those around us who already have the task of facilitating their entry.

This is the ELCA through the Accompanying Migrant Minors with Protection, Advocacy, Representation and Opportunities (AMMPARO) Welcoming Congregations program and the LIRS through the EMMAUS program.

## So how and when do we make this commitment?

A survey will be sent out in November to gauge whether this is a commitment we are ready to make. If more than 75% of responders answer “yes” then the vote will take place at our next annual meeting.

At our annual meeting in January 2022, we will take a vote on whether to endorse the following statement.

Bethesda Lutheran Church in Ames, Iowa makes these commitments:

- to welcome and minister to migrants and refugees and to identify a contact person in the congregation who has access to the language skills necessary for basic communication
- to physically accompany migrants and refugees as they make new lives in our community
- to pray for migrants and refugees
- to advocate for public policy that will positively impact the current immigration and refugee crises, including working in partnership with the ELCA Washington office and LIRS on immigration and refugee reform

Our commitments and our completion of the EMMAUS: A Congregational Discernment Guide will demonstrate that we are a trustworthy and engaged partner. And then the hard work begins.

Thanks be to God.

