

This short resource is intended to assist Lutheran rostered leaders in their faithful public responsibility by providing talking and preaching points from the perspective of **Scripture, Lutheran theology, and the Lutheran historical experience.**

The current public policy debate on refugees and immigration has become a divisive topic. Of course, the Church does not subscribe to party affiliations. There are people of faith and of good will who disagree about government policies and belong to different political parties. That being said, the Church is publicly engaged in society and acts as a [“community of moral deliberation”](#) in the midst of the civil realm. This is not a matter of injecting politics into the Church, but rather of Christians participating in their vocations as responsible citizens by working for the common good. The ELCA constitution states that the Church is to “serve in response to God’s love to meet human needs, caring for the sick and the aged, advocating dignity and justice for all people, working for peace and reconciliation among the nations, and standing with the poor and powerless and committing itself to their needs.” (C4.012.c) . ELCA pastors, specifically, have a responsibility to “speak publicly to the world in solidarity with the poor and oppressed, calling for justice and proclaiming God’s love for the world” (C9.03.a.5). In this regard, Lutherans are uniquely positioned to engage in conversation among themselves and with the greater American public on the matter of refugees and immigration.

First, however, it would be good to pause and be clear about definitions as defined by the U.S. government.

- [U.S. citizen](#) – any person born in the United States, certain territories or possessions of the U. S., or is born of a parent or parents who were citizens at the time of birth. The right of [jus soli](#) has been an important ideal of the U.S. since its founding and makes it unique among many other countries that require blood lines as proof of citizenship.
- [Naturalized U.S. citizen](#) – a foreign citizen or national granted citizenship after he/she fulfills the requirements established by Congress.
- [Permanent Resident \(Green Card holder\)](#) – a foreign citizen or national granted authorization to live and work in the United States on a permanent basis.
- [Immigrant](#) – a foreign citizen or national who has entered the U.S. legally. Often called Resident Alien.
- [Asylum Seeker](#) – a person who has crossed a border and petitioned for protection (but not granted refugee status).
- [Refugee](#) – a person of special humanitarian concern who has demonstrated that they were persecuted or have a legitimate fear of persecution due to race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group, is not permanently settled in another country, and has been accepted for resettlement after a lengthy U.N. eligibility process. The U.S. has an additional eligibility process for refugees that it will accept. (Asylum Seeker and Refugee are two terms often misapplied.)

Scripture

The topic of “alien” or “foreigner” [Heb = *ger, nekar, zoor*; Greek = *paroikos, xenos*] is a common theme in both the Old and New Testaments.

- Abraham and Sarah’s hospitality to strangers in Gen 18:1-15 is given theological significance in human relations in Heb. 13:2.
- Hospitality in the ancient near east is more than an invitation to dinner, but part of the social expectation extended to outsiders (Jud 13:15; 2 Kgs 4:8-11, Job 31:34).
- The Old Testament is replete with reminders to the Israelites to extend hospitality to the “stranger” precisely because they too were “foreigners in the land of Egypt” (Ex. 22:21; see also Lev 19:33-34; Lev 24:22; Dt 1:16; 10:18; 5:12-15; 14:28-29; 24:14).
- In the NT “hospitality” is lit. *Philoxenos* = love/foreigner, which is the opposite of *xenophobia* = fear/foreigner. A useful resource on the biblical ethic of Hospitality to immigrants as it relates to immigration reform has been lifted up by several law professors: [“Hospitality: How a Biblical Virtue Could Transform United States Immigration Policy.”](#)
- Jesus notes that responding to the stranger has spiritual significance in Matt 25.
- Jesus provides key teaching moments on “loving the neighbor” (Lk 10:30-37; Matt 22:34-40) and the “golden rule” Matt 6:31-36; Lk 7:12; James 1:8-9.
- Believers are called to act hospitably (1 Tim 5:10, Titus 1:8; 1 Pet 4:9).

Lutheran Theology

Martin Luther's most famous treatise, "On the Freedom of a Christian" (1520) provides guidance for an ethic on loving the neighbor: "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject of all." Freed by Christ from our sins, Christians respond in gratitude to love our neighbors, including all those in need (Matt 25).

- Luther's Small Catechism provides guidelines for positive actions in our experience with immigrants and foreigners in the explanation to the 1st article of the creed he notes that "God has made me and all creatures." All humanity is *Imago Dei* (Gen 1:26).
- In his explanation to the 8th commandment: "We are to fear and love God that we do not tell lies about our neighbors, betray them or slander them, or destroy their reputations. Instead we are to come to their defense, speak well of them, and interpret everything they do in the best possible light."
- In 1998, the ELCA passed its social message on [Immigration](#).
- The [Journal of Lutheran Ethics](#) provides ongoing deliberation by Lutheran theologians and ethicists on a variety of social issues, including [immigration](#).

Lutheran Historical Experience

The end of World War II left millions of displaced persons in its wake, including 1/5 of the Lutheran population of Europe. One response to this crisis was the creation of institutions to help those suffering and uprooted by the ravages of war, political turmoil, or persecution.

- Organized in 1945, [Lutheran World Relief](#) affirms God's love for all people, and works to end poverty, injustice and human suffering. It has become one of the most widely recognized relief agencies in the world. LWR has been especially active in [Iraq](#), [Syria](#), and [Jordan](#).
- Lutherans themselves have been, at various times, the victims of religious persecution or cultural discrimination in countries such as Lithuania, Latvia, Ethiopia, and the [United States](#).
- The 1948 U.N. Declaration of Human Rights was shaped by the work of O. Fred Nolde, professor of the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia. His legacy still exists through the [Lutheran Office for World Community](#).
- [The Lutheran Office for Immigration and Refugee Services](#) is the U.S. based social ministry that has been working with immigrants and refugees since 1939. LIRS has much experience and skill in this complex issue and continues to advocate for [positive legislation](#). LIRS [factsheets](#) provide critical information about the current and lengthy U.N. refugee resettlement process. They have also developed [My Neighbor is Muslim: Exploring the Muslim Faith](#).
- Various regional [Lutheran Social Service organizations](#) are partners of LIRS and the U.N. They work with local congregations and ministries to assist in the resettlement of refugees and rely on private gifts, state and federal grants.

Muslim refugees

The recent national debate has been focused on Muslim refugees specifically and how to keep Americans safe from the dangers of Islamic extremists or terrorists. Information about Islam as a religion is highly contentious and much of the material is not balanced. Lutherans have disagreed about the place of Islam in the economy of God's world – with some committed to the conversion of Muslims and others acknowledging that Islam carries some form of God's revelation. Nevertheless, American Lutherans of diverse opinions have a long history of positive interaction with and among Muslim communities around the world, including Muslim Majority countries, through [education, development and relief work](#).

- In 1990, the Division for Global Mission made [Christian-Muslim Relations](#) as one foci of its work. As a result, resources have been produced to help American Christians to go beyond broad stereotypes and engage with specific Muslim communities and individuals, especially those who have been resettled.
- [The ELCA Consultative Panel on Lutheran-Muslim Relations](#) provides resources for the church on Islam and Christian-Muslim relations.
- Of particular interest to congregations may be [Talking Points](#), and [Understanding and Responding to Terrorism](#), as well as the 2004 social message "[Living in a Time of Terrorism](#)."

Clearly a Lutheran ethic and witness can help allay public anxiety and fear. The God of Jesus Christ is active and working to create peace, justice and love for the sake of the world.