

TO LOVE GOD AND TO LOVE OUR NEIGHBOR

A Statement from the Office of the Bishop
Delaware-Maryland Synod, ELCA

One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that Jesus answered them well, he asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." – Mark 12:28-31

Dear Sisters and Brothers, All:

In 1939, Lutheran Christians, crossing many boundaries, agreed that the rise of Nazism had become so horrendous that, even when our country wasn't able to speak with one voice, as people of faith, we had to. Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service was born out of a strong conviction that refugees had to be protected from regimes that would threaten the very liberties so many of us take for granted each day. For 78 years, LIRS has been a faithful partner in this mission, which began with guaranteeing the safe passage and resettlement of Christians and Jews perceived as enemies of the Nazi party in Eastern Europe into a new life here in the United States. That work has gone uninterrupted: resettling refugees, with the help of congregations and families across this church, of every racial and religious background from Africa, Asia, Central America, South America and Europe simply because they are deemed *refugees* – in danger, threatened, *needing refuge*, sheltering. We know that it is our Christian responsibility to care after our sisters and brothers in mortal danger and material need, even as our Lord commanded that we should love God and love our neighbor.

This week, the voice of our church about refugees has been getting media attention, and our witness has not been clear. Whereas *individually* we might not be of one mind about our refugee sisters and brothers, our church has a clear position: we are willing to risk ourselves and leverage our influence for these our most vulnerable neighbors.

I don't minimize that it is scary to receive the stranger without guarantees that everything will turn out happily ever after; but happily ever after is not faith, it's a fairy tale. We have domesticated our Christian faith and diminished our Christian witness when we are not willing to act without guarantees; when we are paralyzed by fear, faith ceases to be faith and the church's witness ceases to be faithful.

I have joined our Presiding Bishop as well as my local ecumenical colleagues in reaching out to our president as well as our Delaware and Maryland state and federal legislators, asking for immediate review of the executive order in question. I am relying on the faithful work of LIRS, ELCA Advocacy and the AMMPARO initiative of our Church to guide us in how we can be actively advocating for our refugee sisters and brothers whose lives are further endangered by these delays. I am assisting our congregations active in refugee resettlement to lobby our Delaware and Maryland governors to be partners in advocating for our work to continue. To love God and neighbor puts us in a precarious spot where the false and illusory hope of "safety" threatens what it means to be faithful to our Lord's calling.

I have diligently sought to avoid inserting myself into political conversations where people of faith can legitimately disagree; but this is not about politics. When it comes to the needs of our refugee sisters and brothers, our calling in Christ is clear: *“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength; you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”*

The commandment to love the neighbor does not require a mere feeling sorry for the situation of our sisters and brothers; it is a call to action. Just as Jesus fed the hungry and healed the sick, just as Jesus defended the weak and cared for the poor, just as Jesus welcomed those who were cast out and excluded by others – so too, we seek to love God and to love our neighbor.

To love God and to love our neighbor, in the words of Jesus, *there is no commandment greater than these.*

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Bill Gohl". The signature is stylized and cursive.

William J. Gohl Jr., Bishop
Delaware-Maryland Synod, ELCA