

November 2, 2011

Dear member of Congress:

As bishops of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), we are compelled to speak to the moral dimensions of the new state immigration laws in Alabama, Arizona, Georgia, Indiana, South Carolina, and Utah. Because the Church values family unity, justice, equity, compassion, and the humane treatment of all people, we are deeply saddened by these shortsighted and misguided laws.

The fair treatment of immigrants is a core religious value and welcoming the stranger is welcoming a child of God. The Hebrew Bible tells us: “When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. . .” (Leviticus 19:33-34). In the New Testament, Jesus tells us to welcome the stranger, for “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” (Matthew 25:40).

The ELCA believes and teaches that all people are created in the image of God and are beloved of God. In our scriptures we are instructed to care for the stranger and to love the immigrant living among us. In that belief, our Church carries out social ministry programs, initiates programs to aid all God’s people, and partners with Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service to promote welcome and justice to refugees and migrants.

We are therefore concerned that these new state laws damage the social fabric of our communities, thus weakening the trust residents have with local and state police and putting families at risk of being torn apart. We are particularly troubled by the laws which would criminalize churches, church ministries, and church members that serve all people who need assistance – regardless of their immigration status.

To restore trust in our communities and to fix our broken U.S. immigration system, we call on Congress and the Administration to work together to pass into law federal immigration reform that recognizes our national heritage of being a country of immigrants and the contributions of immigrants to the U.S. economy and culture. An immigration overhaul must include the following provisions:

1. Earned pathway to lawful permanent residency and eventual U.S. citizenship for immigrants and their families who learn English and pay back taxes.
2. Expedient reunification of families separated due to lengthy visa backlogs and protections against the unnecessary separation of families.
3. Expansion of legal avenues for workers to allow immigrants to migrate to the United States in a safe, legal, and orderly manner.
4. Decreased use of immigration detention, improvement in detention conditions with increased access to medical assistance, pastoral care, and legal counsel, and the increased use of community-based programs that assist immigrants who do not need to be incarcerated.

5. Improved border policies that treat all individuals with respect and allow the U.S. government to focus on individuals involved in the trafficking of persons, drugs, weapons, or other dangerous people seeking entry to the United States.
6. Increased programs and resources to help immigrants participate fully in U.S. social and civic life by assisting them with English language acquisition, civics education, and naturalization.

We, the undersigned ELCA bishops, stand with other religious, community, and business leaders in opposing misguided and punitive state immigration laws and working for the passage of much-needed federal immigration reform.

Sincerely,

The Rev. Thomas Aitken
Bishop, Northeastern Minnesota Synod

The Rev. Claire Burkat
Bishop, Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod

The Rev. Jon Anderson
Bishop, Southwestern Minnesota Synod

The Rev. Bruce Burnside
Bishop, South-Central Synod of Wisconsin

The Rev. James Arends
Bishop, La Crosse Area Synod

The Rev. Jessica Crist
Bishop, Montana Synod

The Rev. Jeffrey Barrow
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The Rev. David deFreese
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The Rev. Allan Bjornberg
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The Rev. Ralph Dunkin
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The Rev. William Boerger
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The Rev. Elizabeth Eaton
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The Rev. Leonard Bolick
Bishop, North Carolina Synod

The Rev. William Gafkjen
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The Rev. David Brauer-Rieke
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The Rev. Michael Girlinghouse
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The Rev. Michael Burk
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The Rev. Richard Graham*
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The Rev. Wolfgang Herz-Lane
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The Rev. Mark Holmerud
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The Rev. Boies Hoover
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The Rev. Marie Jerge
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The Rev. Ralph Jones
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The Rev. Marcus Lohrmann
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The Rev. Felipe Lozada-Montañez
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The Rev. James Mauney
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The Rev. Wayne Miller*
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The Rev. Mark Narum
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The Rev. Dean Nelson
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The Rev. Margaret Payne
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The Rev. Robert Rimbo*
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The Rev. William Rindy
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The Rev. Michael Rinehart*
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The Rev. Peter Rogness
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The Rev. Samuel Roth
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The Rev. John Schleicher
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The Rev. Stephen Talmage*
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The Rev. Samuel Zeiser
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The Rev. David Zellmer
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** Member of the ELCA Conference of Bishops' Immigration Ready Bench*