



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

November 19, 2015

ELCA statement on U.S. response to refugee resettlement

We are shocked and dismayed by the terrorist attacks in Paris, Beirut, Egypt and elsewhere in the Middle East, but also in Nigeria, Kenya, Bangladesh and the Philippines. Senseless acts of terror will maim and forever have an impact on innocent victims and their families. Our hearts and prayers go out to all whose lives have been shattered and are grieving the loss of loved ones. We know all too well the frightening memories of terrorist attacks in the U.S. and the uncertainties of possible future attacks.

Yet, we Christians and all others of good will cannot let fear rule the day. Fear paralyzes, divides people, fosters distrust and clouds judgments. We also stand shoulder to shoulder with people of faith who are firmly opposed to vengeful reprisals and prejudice. In particular, we are concerned for and committed to standing with our Muslim neighbors who are facing threats and acts of discrimination and hate by those who conflate Islam with terrorism.

Even in the face of evil, we remain confident that the good news of Jesus Christ liberates us and gives us the freedom and courage to discover and boldly participate in what God is up to in this world. “The Gospel also frees ‘us from fear to see others as brothers and sisters for whom Christ died and lives’” (ELCA Social Message on Terrorism, 2004).

We are not naive about possible new threats of terrorism, but denying refuge to thousands of desperate people is not who we are as Christians, nor will it guarantee our security. The United States is a welcoming country with a religiously diverse society, and our refugee resettlement program should continue to reflect this. We must redouble our efforts to work for a more secure world – one with less hate and more understanding. Doing less than that only feeds into the terrorist propaganda.

The thousands of courageous Syrian refugees fleeing their homeland go through a rigorous security screening involving the Department of Homeland Security, the FBI, the Department of Defense and multiple intelligence agencies. Refugees are the most scrutinized and screened individuals to enter the U.S. Intensive security screening by the government of all refugees prior to admission to the U.S. is and should continue to be a detailed and thorough process.

Lutherans have a long history in this country of settling refugees, including those fleeing from dangerous situations like the war in Syria. We draw on both biblical witness as well as the best of our nation's traditions as a refuge and haven for the persecuted and destitute. We support “a generous policy of welcome for refugees and immigrants” and “will advocate for just immigration policies, in visa regulations and in admitting and protecting refugees. We will work for policies that cause neither undue repercussions within immigrant communities nor bias against them” (ELCA Social Message on Immigration, 1997).

Currently, more than 25 governors are opposed to allowing Syrian refugees into their states. While the states do not have the legal authority to prevent resettlement, it is distressing that these governments could

make refugee resettlement for Syrians and those from other war-torn areas more difficult. Of the Syrian refugees being referred by the U.N. for settlement, more than half are children and a significant number are women or elderly men.

I urge the members of our church to call upon our elected officials to be leaders in speaking up for refugees already persecuted and traumatized and ensuring that our country continues to reflect the principles and values of a nation committed to freedom. The legacy of our welcome to refugees is that our economy, social fabric, communities and nation as a whole are stronger. [Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service](#) (LIRS) has developed many resources on this topic for your congregations. You can also contact your elected officials through the [ELCA Advocacy action alert](#).

Let us recommit ourselves to sharing encouragement to those persecuted as we seek to be a disturbing, reconciling, serving and deliberating presence in God's world. This will demand difficult, courageous work from each of us. "As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace" (Ephesians 6:15).

God's peace,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Elizabeth A. Eaton".

The Rev. Elizabeth A. Eaton
Presiding Bishop
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America