



NORTHEASTERN IOWA SYNOD

EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN AMERICA

Office of the Bishop

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April 11, 2017

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

On May 12, 2008, my home town of Postville, Iowa was invaded by the United States government. Helicopters circled over the community. Roads were blockaded. Guard dogs were released. ICE agents in military gear of boots, flak jackets and machine guns entered the packing plant compound. Hundreds were arrested. Others fled into the neighboring corn fields, hid in their homes, or hastily left Postville for good. Families were separated. Because the raid occurred during the first shift at the plant, families with children were affected in far greater numbers than workers who were single. Many children were left without parents to care for them.

The next day, school classrooms were decimated. One class of 26 had 9 students attend school the day after the raid. Children, both Anglo and Latino, were awakened at night by nightmares, fearing that they or their family members would be arrested and taken away. Local businesses knew the economic impact of the chaos. Family members that remained were terrified of being taken, so they gathered at the local Catholic church for safety. They returned home after five days. Most returned to the church in a panic just a few days later when a train pulling box cars from the Iowa, Chicago, and Eastern railroad rolled through Postville. The railroad logo was IC&E. The assumption was that ICE agents were back to take them away in greater numbers in box cars.

One year later, a service of prayer was co-sponsored by the Catholic and Lutheran churches. A news agency sent a helicopter to cover the event. As it hovered over the church, children, both Anglo and Latino, ran screaming into the church, "ICE! ICE! ICE!"

Though the town is on the road to recovery, these nine years later the journey is not complete.

For generations, there have been some Americans who have opposed the arrival of immigrants. Irish were feared to be more loyal to the Pope than the U. S. They were considered to be infiltrators with the sole agenda of destroying our country. The Irish were treated with brutality until refugees and immigrants from Asia began entering our country. The Irish were then deemed to be "European" and, therefore, acceptable. Germans so threatened some citizens of this country that a new political party was started named "The Know Nothing Party." The next wave of anti-immigrant terror was directed at the German immigrants following the great World Wars.

We also remember all those who seek refuge in our country. These people, created in the image of God, know that a return to their homeland means certain torture and death. Men, women and children have heard of a land based on freedom, that welcomes the oppressed, that creates opportunities and encourages others into the journey of being the home of the brave.

The Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service was formed in response to these needs. Our tradition is to welcome immigrants and refugees in keeping with the call from Holy Scripture. Scripture is clear. God's people are to provide for the well-being of immigrants and treat them as if they are citizens of our country. (Leviticus 19:33-34). Lutherans will treat the immigrants and refugees as citizens of this country because God's Word calls us to be a welcoming people.

Immigrants and refugees have helped make this country great. The list of inventions and benefits to our culture is too long to include in this letter. Our towns and schools would be far less populated without the new immigrants and refugees. Hampton schools are one-third Latino, the kindergarten class is half Latino and half Anglo. Postville schools are almost half Latino. Minority enrollment is 59%, far above the Iowa average of 21%. These are but two examples from our synod.

Please join me on May 12th in remembering what happened at Postville and the historic commitment of Lutherans in this country to welcome immigrants and refugees. I invite you to engage immigrants and refugees in conversations about the current climate in our country regarding their presence in this land of the free. Ask about their hopes and dreams as well as their fears. Your congregation may choose to host a meal, inviting new immigrants and refugees to join you in sharing favorite dishes representing the various nations of origin.

Then, I ask you to pray together. Pray for open hearts and new opportunities. Pray for mutual encouragement and support. Pray that the words of Emma Lazarus that grace a plaque on the Statue of Liberty will still be true today. "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

God bless you.

Your Partner in the Gospel,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Steven L. Ullestad". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned below the typed name.

The Rev. Steven L. Ullestad
Bishop