



AMY ELLIOTT

**When Joe Chen (right) goes to court for deportation hearings, he often is accompanied by David H. Rommereim, pastor of Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Brooklyn, N.Y.**

(New York doesn't classify itself as a "sanctuary city" because undocumented immigrants who commit a crime are supposed to be reported.)

But since last May, New York has been called a sanctuary city in another sense: It's home to some of the first churches in the national New Sanctuary Movement to help immigrants facing expulsion from the U.S. ELCA pastors David H. Rommereim of Good Shepherd, Samuel Cruz of Trinity and Giovanni Sanchez of *Del Espíritu Santo* are leading these Brooklyn congregations in accompanying China native Joe Chen through his deportation hearings.

Chen has lived in the U.S. for a dozen years and has a wife with a separate case. Their two young children are U.S. citizens. The family has started worshiping at all three churches. "If the parents are deported, the family faces being split up, and those values don't sit right with the church," Rommereim said.

### **Seeking options to deportation**

The pastors accompany Chen to court dates and Immigration and Customs Enforcement check-ins, and they work with lawyers to find options. "We're very careful that we're following the rules of the land," Rommereim said.

"During the 1980s when local churches declared themselves sanctuaries for Central American refugees ... sanctuary workers were willing to participate in civil disobedience and break federal laws because of their faith," according to the Access to Justice Unit of Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service. In a November 2007 memo addressing legal concerns, LIRS President Ralston H. Deffen-

## **In New York City**

# **Three congregations work to stop deportations—'following the rules of the land'**

By Heidi Ernst

**N**ew York City has been a haven for immigrants for centuries, a fact manifest in the Metropolitan New York Synod: Twenty-three languages are spoken on any given Sunday among its 217 congregations in the five boroughs, Long Island and seven counties to the north. "Even some of those congregations founded 200 years ago still have the mother tongue for worship because we continue to have people crossing borders or planes arriving," said Gary E. Mills, executive assistant to the bishop.

But the area that has received millions upon millions of the "tired and

poor" from around the world has in recent times been both derided and praised as a city of sanctuary.

Last November, Americans watched as the idea was debated between Republican presidential candidates Mitt Romney and Rudy Giuliani. Romney opposed what he called Giuliani's welcome of undocumented immigrants when he was mayor.

Giuliani had inherited an executive order that shielded undocumented people—estimated at 500,000 by the Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs—from being asked their immigration status by public officials.

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baugh Jr. wrote: “Civil disobedience can be a powerful witness. ... [Nevertheless] Lutheran churches that consider engaging in sanctuary activities ... should be fully aware of the very serious possible legal consequences, including criminal liability.”

Rommereim was commissioned more than two years ago by former bishop Stephen P. Bouman to convene a committee on immigration to instruct synod clergy and lay people about such legal risks—for church and immigrant—and provide factual resources to congregations whether or not they can offer sanctuary.

Much of the education at the committee’s seminars is “simply information about what is an undocumented person, what are their rights, how to be welcoming and, more important, how to look for help that’s available,” Mills said.

Next year at every Metropolitan New York Synod conference, Rommereim hopes a lawyer and team from Lutheran agencies can inform rostered leaders and members about the issues in nonpartisan language.

Many congregations in New York City have ministered for decades to undocumented members and friends. At Salam Arabic Lutheran Church, Brooklyn, one member’s house was raided last fall, and he was taken to a detention center in Pennsylvania, said Khader N. El-Yateem, the pastor. Released on bail, the Syrian man will return to court in May.

And Heidi Neumark, pastor of Trinity of Manhattan Lutheran, where services are in Spanish and English and some members are undocumented, served 19 years at a Bronx church where two people were deported. These are only two such stories in the city of 8.2 million residents.

“New York City can be kind of overwhelming,” Rommereim said. “But it never changes and will still be immigrant/migrant.” □