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Jessica: Welcome to Tangible: Theology Learned and Lived.
We're exploring the ways in which theology permeates all aspects of life.
Through conversations with faculty here at Concordia Seminary St. Louis, we will challenge you to deepen your theology and live out your faith in Christ.
I'm your producer and host, Jessica Bordeleau.
I'll talk with a variety of professors on a variety of topics, something different every episode, but all pointing to the intersection of faith and daily life, when it's Tangible: Theology Learned and Lived.
Today we're talking about migration and the church's response to immigrants.
I have two experts in the studio today.
They've both made this topic a focus in their ministry, but in different ways.
Dr. Leo Sánchez and Dr. Douglas Rutt.

Dr. Leo Sánchez is Professor of Hispanic Ministries and Systematic Theology here at Concordia Seminary St. Louis.

He served as the main drafter for the LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations

report titled "Immigrants Among Us, a Lutheran Framework for Addressing Immigration Issues".
He was awarded a sabbatical grant from the Louisville Institute.

He was the recipient of a grant from the Hispanic Theological Initiative and is on the editorial board of the Journal of Hispanic Latino Theology.

Dr. Sanchez, welcome to the show.

Leo: Thank you.

Pleasure to be here.

Jessica: Dr. Sanchez suggested that we invite Dr. Douglas Rutt to the conversation.
Dr. Rutt is Professor Emeritus and served as Provost here at Concordia Seminary St. Louis.
He was the Executive Director of International Ministries at Lutheran Hour Ministries.
He has served in Central America for eight years.
His published works include "Mission in the Age of Migration".
And he currently serves as the Board Chair of Christian Friends of New Americans, a St. Louis based ministry.

Dr. Rutt, welcome to the show.

Douglas: Thank you.

It's good to be here.

Jessica: I'd like to start at the ground level.

Dr. Sanchez, who are you referring to when you talk about immigrants?

Leo: OK, that's a good question because there are several categories of people who migrate.
And you have refugees, asylum seekers.
And usually when you talk about neighbors in these categories, you're talking about people who had to leave their country because of proven fear of persecution due to things like race or a political affiliation, membership in a certain group.
And there are a number of criteria that you have to meet in order to be a refugee and an asylum seeker.
So a refugee usually actually goes into a refugee camp or something of that sort in

another country, often a neighboring country.

And then there is a whole vetting or resettlement process where someone might leave a refugee camp and then go to a host country.

And asylum seekers differ in that they usually come to the border of the country that they want to enter into.

And so they have to claim, prove somehow that there's also a reasonable fear of persecution due to things like the ones we mentioned before, including religion.

Also I forgot to mention religion and so on.

And then you have what we might call other migrants, including immigrants, who typically we're talking about other types of factors that move people to migrate, but do not fall into the definition of refugee and asylum seeker.

And those factors could be things like family unification in the country that you're migrating

to, or you might have better looking for better socioeconomic conditions or better educational opportunities, things like that.

It could be also the fear of gang violence, things that are not in the official category of refugees, so they wouldn't qualify for refugee status.

Could be political instability.

There are also people who qualify for entry into the United States under humanitarian visas.

That's totally different from refugee and asylum seeking status.

And those are things like spousal abuse, human trafficking.

We often hear of human trafficking in the world of migration today.

So, again, I think by knowing the different types of migrants, it helps you to put that human face, you know, so that when you are listening to their stories, you may actually ask, how can we best help them?

So, you know, I always tell people in churches, it's not like we're called to know everything there is to know about legal stuff.

But sometimes it's helpful to have some knowledge of that.

Just so that you can maybe assist neighbors who come within the vicinity of the church.

But that's a long way to get to your question, but it's kind of an important way, you know, the different types of migrants in the world today.

And it's good to know who they are.

Douglas: Someone might even migrate to the United States to teach at a seminary.

Leo: Like this guy who was born in Chile and raised in Panama.

I had a colleague of ours who is retired now who used to say that I was working my way up north.

Jessica: Especially because you went to college in Wisconsin, you went very far north.

Leo: That's right.

That's right.

That's as far north as I got.

Yeah, and that was a whole different category of migrant.

That was a student, a migrant under a student visa.

And that's a whole other process.

Douglas:

There are probably about 850 to 950,000 international students in the United States right now.

What's interesting is that most of them, they come here, of course, not just to learn about, you know, medical science or whatever their field happens to be, but to learn something about America and American life.

That's why they get sent here.

And 80 percent of them never see the inside of an American's home while they're here at, let's say Wash U or even here maybe at the seminary.

Leo: So we can always ask the good Lord to help us be more hospitable, I suppose.

Yes, hospitality is a virtue, right, of the church, a gift of the spirit that we should always ask for.

You know, it's in some ways, even for Luther, kind of a mark of the church.

Usually when Lutherans think of marks of the church, they think, you know, the gospel and the sacraments and because they deliver the gospel.

But sometimes Luther adds other things, you know, like praying for others and bearing crosses.

And Luther also speaks of hospitality as a sort of a mark of the church in his lectures on Genesis.

He's talking about Abraham's hospitality towards the three strangers at Mamre.

Jessica: Remind us of that story.

Leo: What did Abraham do?

Yeah, so Abraham is visited by three strangers.

And so Abraham invites them and has a meal prepared for them and so on and so forth.

And the story becomes in the early church, particularly a very popular part of scripture.

Abraham is seen as sort of the example of hospitality in the early church.

I think of a number of theologians who go to Abraham to teach the church what it means to be hospitable.

And Luther elevates in some ways hospitality to a mark of the church.

And he has this beautiful turn of phrase where he says, the church is the house of Abraham in the world.

Beautiful, you know, how many of our churches are actually called St. Abraham?

Not too many.

Douglas: No, that's wonderful.

That's really great.

I think about the passage in Hebrews that says, you know, you may entertain angels unawares by extending hospitality.

And so we don't oftentimes even know what impact we're going to have.

And I could just tell a little story.

I was in China and was at a congregation in Shamian Island and had the opportunity to talk to the congregation.

And afterwards, a young lady came up to me and somehow when I talked, I mentioned the fact that I was from Minnesota.

She said, well, where in Minnesota did you grow up?

And I said, well, Mankato.

And she said, oh, Mankato.

She said, I went to college in Mankato.

I assumed she'd gone to Minnesota State, but she said, no, she went to Bethany Lutheran College, which is where I went to also.

That's where she said she met him.

And what she meant by that is Jesus.

She talked about it was like being snatched out of a burn unit when she met Jesus Christ.

And she said it wasn't because it was interesting, the religion classes that I was taking, and it wasn't because of having to go to chapel or anything like that.

It was the hospitality, basically.

The way people received her and accepted her and extended hospitality to her is what really impressed her about the gospel.

Leo: That's amazing.

Douglas: Yeah.

Leo: So it was the church being the house of Abraham in the world of Mankato.

Douglas: Yeah, absolutely.

Leo: The text that you mentioned from Hebrews kind of alludes to Abraham because it's about, you know, you never know there might be angels, you know, visiting you.

And so the reference is kind of going back to the Abraham story, even in Hebrews.

So, yeah, it's part of embodying Abraham in a different way.

But that's always struck me as a wonderful catechesis or teaching from Luther, which happens at a time when you have a lot of, I guess we might call them displaced persons or refugees today.

There are people who are fleeing from other lands, surrounding lands, fleeing into the, you know, the land of Frederick the Magnanimous, who would have been Luther's prince at that time. And they're fleeing because mostly because of religious persecution.

And so it is in the midst of that, you know, that occasion that Luther teaches the church about hospitality.

So, you know, it's not unlike our world today because we live now at a time when we have the largest numbers of displaced people.

I'm using this displaced in the broader sense to include a number of categories, mostly refugees and asylum seekers.

But I think it's like 120 million, I think is one out of every 69 people on earth are displaced either within the same country or out of their country of origin somewhere else.

Douglas: And those would be those who are more displaced because of adverse conditions, because there's a lot of other people on the move as well.

And in that article that I wrote, "Immigration in the Age of migration", I discovered there was close to 300 million people on the move around the world for various reasons.

Leo: Wow. In chapel, sometimes here at the seminary, people get to say a prayer, you know, and then everybody says, Lord, in your mercy, here are our prayer.

But I say, well, I'll pray for displaced people around the world, you know, because you don't often hear prayers like this.

You know, we pray for a lot of things in church, but you hardly hear about displaced peoples or refugees or migrants or that kind of stuff.

So I always try to pray something like for displaced neighbors around the world that they might find a country and a church to call home.

You know, but yeah, I wonder, you know, I think maybe part of the hesitance, the hesitancy about praying for migrants is that, you know, you have a lot of controverted discussions today about the illegals.

Usually it's the...

And illegal immigration is an issue not only in the United States.

It's a global issue.

But I think often there is just sort of a way in which migrants are painted, you know, with a broad brush and some people are especially offended sometimes by the notion that, you know, we might have migrants who are illegal or undocumented or unauthorized and that kind of stuff.

And it could be because of that that sometimes pastors are shy about praying for migrant neighbors in their communities and so on.

Douglas: I think it's really, to me, bothersome when people put everybody into this big group and then give them this label.

Leo: Yeah.

Douglas: There are people who are undocumented.

There are people who are here illegally, if you will.

There are still people, you know, and there's just a lot of circumstances which we don't understand about every single one of them.

Leo: Yeah.

I think what happens with the category of illegal and legal, right, is that it places the migrant within the spectrum of a very restrictive category.

And there is a place for talking about issues concerning legality and so on.

But it's not really a fundamental biblical category for referring to migrants.

I mean, the biblical categories would be neighbors.

Migrants are actually under the command to love the neighbor.

And they're often placed with that group of people who are considered most vulnerable, like the widows and the orphans and the poor.

And then they put in there the aliens.

And God even commands Israel to love the aliens in their midst because they, too, were once aliens in Egypt.

The Old Testament doesn't give you public policy on immigration and it's not intended to give you law on immigration, but it does give you a certain moral compass, you know, like the way you look at these people are as neighbors under God's command.

And then, of course, there are also people for whom Christ died.

Those are Christians ways of thinking about neighbors.

So we can disagree in terms of temporal matters of the state, but we can still agree on the church's mission, which is uniquely hers, which is to proclaim the gospel and to provide for the spiritual needs of all people, including migrants.

But what I always tell people is, and this is where I hand the Lutheran distinction between the two kingdoms or the two realms, it's wonderful, right?

There is a temporal realm that deals with justice and how we relate to each other here.

And we're going to have disagreements on what that looks like politically.

But there is also the spiritual realm through which God justifies sinners through faith in Christ, the proclamation of the gospel, the beauty of Lutheran theology to help you sort out some of this.

Douglas: No, I mean, it's true.

You're called to pray for your enemies, love your neighbor, pray for those who persecute you.

Leo: All of a sudden, an issue that would have been so difficult to handle at the macro level became a lot easier to handle because now it has to do with actual neighbors whom I have been called to serve.

And that's the beauty of the Lutheran vision on vocation.

It helps you to land the plane.

Right. So that you can say, well, who are the migrants who are in my community, in my church, right, in my workplace, in my college or university, and because I am somehow connected to these people, what then are the responsibilities that follow from those vocations and callings? That's the wonderful thing about vocation.

I should think about responsibilities towards people you've been called to serve in some way. Yeah, the Lutherans have to say some things about this stuff.

Douglas: I wanted to back up a little bit, too, about a story that when I went to, we had been in Guatemala for a few years, we came back to the States and I ended up accepting a call to a congregation in southern Minnesota, literally St. John's in the cornfields. It was out in the out in the country.

And the congregation had taken it upon itself to receive a refugee family from Vietnam by the name of Vang.

It was the grandparents, the parents and the children.

And they had an old farmhouse that they fixed up for them.

And this family, this extended family came and stayed at the congregation or stayed in the township there near the congregation.

And the kids started going to the little Lutheran school.

Wonderful. And and it turns out that one of those little boys was the first Hmong pastor in the LCMS.

That was really the beginning of the Hmong ministry in the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, which has since that time grown a great deal.

So it's entertaining angels unaware.

I don't think the congregation ever thought that something like that was going to happen.

And even today, these are a bunch of old German farmers.

I don't think they, you know, you'd probably talk to them about it.

They just shrugged their shoulders.

They didn't. They just were trying to help this family.

But it really turned into something that was remarkable.

I think migration and immigration really enriches life for everybody in many ways, even though, you know, obviously there's problems and challenges and difficulties.

But at the same time, it can be a very enriching experience for for everybody, for those who do come here to live, as well as those who get to know those folks who have come to live among us.

Leo: I remember I was asked to, I think, preach in some town in Illinois, and they were wondering, you know, if there was a way they could reach out to a couple of Hispanic families. I think they were from Mexico who had arrived at this town. And they were struggling with the best way to enter into a relationship with the family. And I think they were probably thinking too hard. They were like, well, nobody here speaks Spanish, you know, so how are we going to deal with that? And I said, well, think about the things that God has already given you. I said, well, you have a school, right? Yeah, they have children, right? They need an education, right? All right. You have a scholarship for migrants?

You have a migrant fund for the family, you know.

So, I mean, there are actual tangible ways that you can be helping and entering into this wonderful relationships with migrants using the resources that God has already given you as a congregation.

And there's a lot there to, you know, to think through and to provide.

My own history coming to the United States was also through the hospitality of a family of farmers from Williamsburg, Iowa.

So greetings to the Delameths, if they're listening.

And I lived with them for a couple of years in high school and then they became mom and dad in the U.S.

They even actually offer a legal guardianship my second year as a high school student in the United States so that I could be sort of fully part of the family and enjoy the benefits of living in Iowa.

You know, so anybody who says, what's this guy last name Sanchez doing in the Lutheran Church? I always tell them I'm a Lutheran from Iowa, so don't mess with me.

And they have become a part of our lives ever since then.

I remember when it was the 100th anniversary of the church, St. Paul's Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, Iowa.

They asked me to preach, you know, and they were so proud.

They were so proud to have what I think maybe at that time was the first child of the congregation who had become a pastor, a Lutheran pastor, you know.

So, I mean, it was just great stuff happens, you know, when we embody that vision, the catechesis from Luther, right, to become the House of Abraham in the world.

And that's what the Delamos were for me.

They were my Abraham, you know.

We struggle sometimes with hospitality.

For some people, it comes more naturally, for sure.

But it's something that we have all been called to do as part of whatever vocations we have been given today.

And, you know, given that we live in a world filled with migrant neighbors, you know, we have a unique opportunity to extend the hand of hospitality to them in the name of Christ, walk with them in their struggles and their hopes and see how we can best embody Yahweh's own concern and Jesus's own concern for the strangers among us even today.

Jessica: I think that an example of that being put into practice is the work of Christian Friends of New Americans.

I've gotten to see the way that that organization has worked with immigrants in St. Louis, because my church is one of the city churches that works with them.

So, Dr. Rutt, tell me more about the way that CFNA is showing God's love to people.

Douglas: Really, it's a number of programs that we carry out.

It's not a big flashy type of operation or anything like that, but it's very personal, very relationship oriented.

So, we have programs, for example, with volunteers to teach and help the refugee children with their schoolwork after school.

So, we have after school programs.

The kids come and different people can come and help them sit down there with their homework

assignment, help them get through it, all of that.

Of course, English as a second language is also another important one for a lot of people.

The driver's ed.

So, we have two cars and we're actually teaching people how to get a driver's license here in the United States.

And that's been kind of a riot in some cases, but it's been very helpful to people.

Another program is, you talked about getting kids in school.

So, there's a scholarship program to help the children who want to attend one of the Lutheran schools.

A lot of them attend different Lutheran schools here.

In the St. Louis area, depending on, they tend to be in a certain part of town, at least when they first get settled here.

So, Word of Life Lutheran School receives a lot of, I think they have probably 17 to 18 of those refugee children in their Lutheran day school.

And then all the way through the Lutheran High School.

So, you know, whatever, you know, and we try to help people if they need furniture.

We'll see if we can, you know, maybe someone we know will donate something.

My grandson, two of my grandsons and I just last week went to receive some items of furniture from a donor and take it down to the family of a refugee family from Eritrea, a mother and her three children.

You know, whatever it takes really in a lot of different ways.

But the main point is to demonstrate the love of Christ in word and deed and to help these new Americans become settled here successfully.

And, you know, certainly with a lot of opportunity to hear the word of God.

Obviously, we don't tell people they have to go to church if they want to receive the support of CFNA, but we want to make sure that they've heard the information.

And so we do that as well.

Jessica: And I've seen the impact of that.

When I was first director of Christian education at Timothy, the church in the city, mostly kids in my youth group were white city kids.

And within six years, there were more people in the youth room that were not born in the U.S. than those that were.

And it changed the face of our church community in awesome ways.

There were also challenges, especially with youth who have been from refugee camps from both Africa and from places in Asia with my white city kids and trying to lead a Bible study could be really difficult sometimes.

But to see families getting baptized and a little girl from a refugee camp going on to be a valedictorian, it wasn't just helpful for the people that came to our church.

It was helpful for all of us to see what the church really should look like.

The ministry at CFNA really put into action opportunities for volunteers, not at my church, not just at my church, but at other churches, too, by having, like you said, volunteers would come and help kids with their homework.

I took my seventh grade daughter for a month to come and help at CFNA and help with the the little kids do their homework.

And that was very significant to her.

I saw a change in her attitude towards wealth and stuff.

And people, it was fabulous.

You know, we go there to serve, but then we find out that we've been served, you know.

I'm in the midst of a project producing a video about the work that CFNA does. That will be a ministry module so that other churches can see the ways that the volunteer structure has been set up and then they can try to do that in their congregations. I'm hoping that that will go through publication and be done within about a year from now.

So listeners, stay tuned.

We'll have a link to that video.

Douglas: Look forward to that.

Jessica: So the people listening to the show, they don't have Christian Friends of New Americans organization in their church.

They maybe don't see people who have migrated to their area and they listen to this and they want to know how they're to be hospitable and how they're to love people.

What should they do?

Leo: Well, the first thing is to look again, because often I think there are people who might be connected in some ways to migrant neighbors.

So look again at the things that you have already been called to do and ask, are their migrant neighbors connected that perhaps I haven't maybe attended to before or seen? So that could be your church.

It could be your neighborhood.

It could be the workplace.

It could be the schools.

Who are your kids, friends and so on?

What are their families?

And ask if there are ways in which, you know, you can get to know those neighbors better and perhaps learn about their stories and their struggles and hopes.

So I think just looking at your circle, reassessing or reevaluating what your circle of or sphere of influence is, I think is always helpful.

We might be missing some people in those circles.

Another thing is, I think, think of the church more broadly than only your congregation.

So I think look broader.

Think of the church in that sort of broader way.

Who can I partner with to assist?

Also keep an eye out for social agencies that have a specific sort of collective call to deal with refugees and other kinds of migrants.

And also look at the resources that you already have.

It could be that you could do more than you might think you can.

But also think not only in terms of what am I going to give these neighbors, think in terms of kind of going along with your story, how and some of what Dr.

Rutt said earlier, too, how are we also enriched by the exchange?

What are the gifts?

What are the talents that they bring with them that can actually help us see the church in a

more catholic way, small c, you know, the church is universal, that is inclusive of people of all languages and tribes and nations and that migrants remind us in many ways of the Catholicity of the church?

Douglas: Well, yeah, and I would say, too, that if anybody is interested in seeing what it's like or what this Ministry of Christian Friends of New Americans is like, by all means, they should get in contact with us so they can go to the website or reach me.

So we were interested in seeing how this model could be reproduced.

But as you know, Jessica, having been involved, it is it's you can't just say it and it happens.

It's a lot of work.

Many, many people through the years have put a lot of work into making this organization what it is

today. Google or check it out on Facebook.

Jessica: All right. Final question for both of you.

Dr. Sanchez, what do you want our listeners to remember?

Leo: Well, for me, it would be what does it mean to be the Lutheran Church and in general, what does it

mean to be the church at a time when we have the largest numbers of displaced people in history? You know, and I think what it means is just to reconnect to that part of our identity, which as Luther puts it so beautifully, is to be the House of Abraham in the world.

Jessica: Dr. Rutt, what do you want our listeners to remember?

Douglas:

I would hope that people would see refugees and migrants and immigrants as individual people, see them from a human perspective, just to see them as individual humans rather than categorize them with a label that could end up having negative connotations.

Jessica: Well, that's all for today.

I'd like to thank our guests, Dr. Leo Sánchez and Dr. Douglas Rutt.

Dr. Sánchez, thanks for being on the show.

Leo: Thank you.

Jessica: Dr. Rutt, thanks for being here.

Douglas: My pleasure.

Jessica: And thank you for listening.

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