

Bishop Elizabeth A. Eaton
Panel on Assembly Sub-Themes, Session V
Salvation – Not for Sale

- It is an honor to join Bishop Siegfried Sander from the Lutheran Church in Chile as together we offer input on the subtheme, “Salvation – Not for Sale.”
- I was asked to provide a response to Elaine Neuenfeldt’s thought-provoking article, “Freedom of Movement and the Reality of Migrants, Displaced Persons and Refugees – a Theological Dialogue based on Acts 27.”
- This article lifts up a salient (if not *the* salient) issue around migration in the context of a globalized free-market (or neo-liberal) economy. Goods and services can cross borders but not humans. Indeed, one of the critiques of this globalized economy is that it has obliterated the concept of a nation state. Borders are not important or significant. They are only when it comes to people, and in this case to certain people. So the question is why? The response lies in two of the key missiological questions of our day: “How do we engage the other?” and “How are we engaged by the other?”
- Article 13 of the Universal Declaration of Human rights is clear about people on the move: “*Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each State. Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country.*” The International Conventions signed by world nations (nation states) safeguard these rights, though of course protection of rights is not a given.
- Here Elaine raises a central issue when she writes: “A critical approach to migration must question the model of society and economic development that produces vulnerability for those who are in movement.” We might also go a step further to question the model (or system) of society and economic development that *causes* the movement, or displacement, itself to occur.
- All systems, including economic systems, fall short of what God intends. “God’s reign is not a new system, a set of prescriptive laws, or a plan of action that depends on what we do. Nor is it a spiritual realm removed from this world. In Jesus Christ, God’s reign intersects earthly life, transforming us and how we view the systems of this world.” (“Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All,” p. 2)
- Over the past 28 years, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has adopted social statements that form the basis of our church’s social teachings. In 1999, the ELCA’s highest legislative body, the Churchwide Assembly, adopted a social statement titled, “Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All,” which expresses the social teaching that economic activity is a means through which God’s will is served for the thriving and wellbeing of humankind and

care of the earth. It recognizes that even though sin distorts human activity, we are called to practice economic activity justly and with special concern for those living in poverty.

- “Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All” provides a biblically-grounded moral framework for engagement in economic life that gives attention to the scope of God’s concern (“for all”); the means by which life is sustained (“livelihood”); what is needed (“sufficiency”); and a long-term perspective (“sustainability”).
- To be sure, “these criteria are in tension with one another. What benefits people in one area, sector, or country may harm those elsewhere. What is sufficient in one context is not in another. What is economically sufficient is not necessarily sustainable. There are difficult and complex trade-offs and ambiguities in the dynamic processes of economic life. As believers, we are both impelled by God’s promises and confronted with the practical realities of economic life. We often must choose among competing claims, conscious of our incomplete knowledge, of the sin that clouds all human judgments and actions, and of the grace and forgiveness given by Christ.” (p. 3)
- Let’s dwell for a moment on the tension between “sufficiency” and “sustainability.” Sufficiency as a measure of adequate access to resources that enable people to meet their basic needs may challenge sustainability, or “the capacity...for all to survive and thrive together over the long term.” This challenge is both material and spiritual, as we find in scripture: “How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help?” (1 John 3:17).
- Here Martin Luther’s sobering insights into the meaning of the commandments against killing, stealing, and coveting are instructive. “We violate ‘you shall not kill’” when we do not help and support others to meet their basic needs. As Luther explained, ‘If you see anyone suffer hunger and do not feed [them], you have let [them] starve.’ ‘To steal’ can include ‘taking advantage of our neighbor in any sort of dealing that results in loss to him [or her] . . . wherever business is transacted and money is exchanged for goods or labor.’ ‘You shall not covet’ means ‘God does not wish you to deprive your neighbor of anything that is [theirs], letting [them] suffer loss while you gratify your greed.’ Related Hebraic laws called for leaving produce in the fields for the poor (Deuteronomy 24:21), a periodic cancellation of debts (Deuteronomy 15:1), and a jubilee year in which property was to be redistributed or restored to those who had lost it, so that they might again have a means of livelihood (Leviticus 25).” p. 5
- If we can recognize the ways in which sufficiency and sustainability both have material and spiritual dimensions, we can begin to understand that “economic life should help sustain humans and the rest of creation – now and into the future.” In other words, the purpose of the economy (of God’s love) is to sustain life, not to create profits.

- The critical link between the economy and this sub-theme, “Salvation – Not for Sale” is how we understand this according to Luther’s doctrine of the two kingdoms. The worldly kingdom operates according to God’s economy of a “sufficient, sustainable livelihood for all,” and the heavenly kingdom operates according to God’s holy economy of salvation through Christ, or “abundant life for all.” In both realms, economic life is ruled by the moral principle “for all.” Thus, salvation is not something to be “purchased” or “consumed” by some, but a gift freely given for all. God intends for life to be both sufficient and abundant!
- Within this understanding of economy, we receive and engage the other as one of God’s children, whose life in the here and now, and throughout all of eternity, is of precious value.
- The current global migration and displacement crisis is an opportunity for the church to live out this understanding of God’s economy. We do so when we intervene to protect and sustain life that is vulnerable, and when we accompany people in order to nurture and nourish life as God intended.
- Our efforts must consider the ways in which women and children are amongst the most vulnerable in this crisis. The faces of migrants are increasingly female, as is the face of poverty. This leads us directly into a critical issue within the migration crisis: human trafficking – and reminds us that all of these sub-themes intersect and overlap.
- A few weeks ago, the ELCA Churchwide Assembly approved the Accompanying Migrant Minors with Protection, Advocacy, Representation, and Opportunities, or AMMPARO Initiative. This initiative seeks to address the central issue: the root causes, the system that produces such large waves of migration. The strategy engages the methodology of our church’s social teaching of long-term sustainability by calling for “opportunities” as a key result area.
- In addition to the AMMPARO Initiative, our social teaching is also guiding our engagement in the Northern Triangle Countries through our partnerships with CASM, LWF-WS, and Pop Noj. It is very important to highlight the goals of sufficiency and sustainability, but also the target “for all.”
- In all of these engagements, we are aware that the root causes of the global migration and displacement crisis have been present with us (with perhaps the exception of climate change) for a while. The difference now is the intensity of such forces which have created a “new normal.”
- How can we, as a global communion, respond in ways that reflect ever more fully God’s economies of “sufficient, sustainable, livelihood for all” and “life abundant for all”?