

Economic Life By Kaari Reiersen

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This ELCA social statement and accompanying study guide are available for free download at www.elca.org/socialstatements. You can order a free printed copy online at that address or by calling 800-638-3522, ext. 2996.

The late 1990s was marked by great attention to changes and growing inequities in the global economic order. *Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All*, the ELCA social statement on economic life adopted at the 1999 Churchwide Assembly, begins by describing the extensive influence that economics have on our lives. Human beings are responsible for economic life, but people often feel powerless in the face of it. The influence of economic practices in our day can feel god-like in how it controls us.

These dynamics raise the central theological questions that this social statement addresses:

- In what or whom do we place our trust?
- How are certain economic assumptions in tension with what we as a church confess?
- How is Christian identity, freedom, and hope rooted in Jesus Christ, rather than in economic success or failure?
- What is the relationship between God's reign of justice and the injustices we face in economic life?

Economic life is intended to be a means through which God's purposes for humankind and creation are to be served (page 2). When this does not happen, we are called to seek changes in economic life in light of the biblically grounded imperative of "sufficient, sustainable livelihood for all."

The terms are defined on the third page of the social statement: 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). The statement recognizes that many things in our economic system place us in tension with those priorities.

For all: especially those living in poverty

For all refers to all people and creation. The power of God's suffering, self-giving love transforms and challenges the church to stand with all who are overlooked for the sake of economic progress or greed—especially those who live in poverty. Outrage over the plight of people living in poverty is a theme throughout the Bible. Martin Luther interprets the commandments in such a way that calls us to ensure we do not allow our greed to prevent our neighbor from having enough.

This social statement renews our commitment to find creative, multi-faceted ways of addressing poverty. Changes are needed in policies and practices of trade, investment, government spending and accountability, and international debt so that the poorest will benefit.

Livelihood: vocation, work, dignity

Livelihood highlights themes of vocation, work, and human dignity. Our livelihoods are the ways we are supported economically—not just our jobs, but our networks (such as family, neighborhood, and church). Our vocation is to seek what is good for people and creation in ways that glorify God and anticipate God's promised future.

Work is the means of sustaining humans and creation. In our shifting job market, our faith reminds us that “our security and livelihood rest ultimately on God.” Through our work we should be able to express ourselves and be treated in ways consistent with our God-given dignity. This dignity should be reflected in hiring, compensation, and worker rights practices to which this church commits itself and calls other employers to do. Income should be raised to move low-paid workers out of poverty.

Sufficiency: enough, but not too much

Sufficiency deals with the sharp contrast between those who do not have enough and those who have too much. This social statement commits us to respond to and address why so many in our midst continue to live in poverty. God calls us to a life of mutual generosity toward all who are our neighbors. Government also is expected to promote the common good and assist those unable to provide for their livelihood.

Many of us have far more than we need and fall into bondage to what we have. Endless accumulation becomes an end in itself; we have confused our wants for our needs. Enormous differences in income and wealth threaten our integrity. Large transnational corporations grow in financial power and influence. These disparities need to be lessened and corporate interests held more accountable to the whole human community.

Sustainability: of the environment, agriculture, and low-income communities

Sustainability calls for efforts to ensure that natural and social systems will survive and thrive together over the long term. We must consider the effects of economic activity on nature and people.

Environmental sustainability requires policies that help reverse ecological destruction. Sustaining agriculture involves addressing farmers' high risk levels, low prices, and the small proportion of the retail food dollar they typically receive.

Sustainable development of low-income communities focuses on the communities' assets, the health and welfare of the residents, and on their plans for the future. Investments should sustain not only businesses but also communities and the environment.

A vision renewed

The statement concludes by acknowledging that the church is a participant in the economic system and, as such, falls short of perfection. In the face of our weariness in pursuit of “sufficient, sustainable livelihood for all,” we hear the word and receive the sacraments. What we receive does sustain us. We are strengthened to continue the struggle for justice and a more equitable economic order by the vision of the coming of God's kingdom. We bear witness to God's intentions for creation. 🌸

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