



Presiding Bishop Eaton urges humane treatment of Haitian and other migrants

“When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien” (Leviticus 19:33).

In a matter of weeks, the number of migrants arriving at the Del Rio, Texas, sector of the U.S.-Mexico border has reached unforeseen levels. The majority are Haitians seeking a better life after having fled multiple crises in their native land. There are also Cuban, Venezuelan and Nicaraguan nationals. U.S. treatment of these Black migrants and others at Del Rio has been deeply problematic. As a matter of humane treatment, I urge that the administration vigorously pursue actions to grant them protection and ensure that responsible actors are held accountable through a serious investigation into allegations of abuse.

For many Haitians, Del Rio is only their latest destination—many have lived and traveled throughout Central and South America as far back as 2010. They have converged now at the international bridge between Del Rio and Ciudad Acuña, Mexico, after sweeping pressures pushed them to make the harrowing migrant journey anew. Upon their arrival, they endured harsh conditions and even harsher treatment, including limited access to essentials such as food and shelter. Reports show that the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) responded by increasing personnel, closing the Del Rio Port of Entry and accelerating removals back to Haiti. This has been done utilizing a controversial policy, known as Title 42, that avoids due process. Some migrants, mostly families, have been allowed to pursue their asylum claims in the United States, but hundreds, including families with young children, have been expelled.

Forcibly returning Haitians disregards the human consequences of their return and the human rights of individuals and families. Haiti is contending with the aftermath of back-to-back crises: a 7.2 magnitude earthquake occurred on Aug. 14, Tropical Storm Grace made landfall soon afterward and multiple landslides have devastated a country already reeling from political and economic turmoil. Recognizing these pervasive issues, the secretary of DHS recently granted Haiti Temporary Protected Status (TPS), thus allowing certain Haitians present in the United States since at least July 29, 2021, to remain and work in the U.S. for a period of 18 months. This recognition conflicts with the sometimes-violent response we've seen over the past few days.

Our church teaches that, as a matter of dignity for all people, the U.S. has an international and moral responsibility to honor the human rights and dignity of migrants, and to not be silent in the face of racial injustice against people of African descent (“Declaration of the ELCA to People of African Descent,” 2019). Migrants should have access to humanitarian protection, including asylum; this can be accomplished by applying the public health recommendations of experts, lifting Title 42 and seeking civil society partners for a compassionate whole-of-society, whole-of-government response. This rapid expulsion of Haitians, back to Haiti and to other countries, is not a responsible or humane migration-management strategy.

As Christians, some of us see our own stories reflected in the faces of these newcomers. Immigration has always been a contentious issue, but new challenges, such as climate change, call for renewed attention to just and humane migration policies. People must be able to migrate—to escape violence, reunite their families and seek work—in a way that is safe and acknowledges national borders and security. The ELCA recommits itself to seeking just, wise and compassionate immigration reform. Remembering the ELCA’s “Churchwide Blueprint for Action on Central America and the Caribbean Concerns,” we reaffirm our commitment to promote mutually supporting relationships with the peoples of this region and to work for justice and peace.

Our church has resources for this purpose, and I invite you to engage in deeper discernment on the plight of migrants by visiting elca.org/ammparo. There you can learn more about how the church accompanies migrant children and families across the Americas through a strategy that includes 54 synods and 202 welcoming and sanctuary congregations.

Together in solidarity,

Elizabeth A. Eaton, Presiding Bishop of the ELCA

“As Christ on the cross did not lose his dignity, but in fact revealed himself fully in vulnerability, every human who is being mistreated retains the image of God that confers dignity. A society should not deny a person’s dignity for any reason.”

—ELCA social message “Human Rights,” p. 4

<https://elca.org/News-and-Events/8119>

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About the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America:

The ELCA is one of the largest Christian denominations in the United States, with nearly 3.3 million members in more than 8,900 worshipping communities across the 50 states and in the Caribbean region. Known as the church of “God’s work. Our hands.,” the ELCA emphasizes the saving grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ, unity among Christians and service in the world. The ELCA’s roots are in the writings of the German church reformer Martin Luther.

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