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# The Freedom of a Christian to Address Sexism

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The people who shaped a new church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), set the course for the ELCA 2019 Churchwide Assembly's action to approve its thirteenth social statement, "Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action." In the late 1980s, lay people and rostered ministers from across the country spent years deciding what the commitments of the new church would be, two of which were what we now refer to as racial justice and gender justice. The ELCA Commission for Multicultural Ministries carried the responsibility to address the effects of racism. The ELCA Commission for Women carried the responsibility to assist this church to address sexism. For years the Commission did this. Eventually, this responsibility was given to the director for Justice for Women.

Among Protestant churches, the ELCA's Justice for Women desk is one of the few remaining. This church gives a strong mandate in the job description for this position: "Responsibilities include calling the ELCA in all its expressions to action and accountability regarding the eradication of sexism."<sup>1</sup> Staff members work in a variety of capacities and spheres to further and strengthen the ELCA's commitment to gender justice, which included supporting the seven-year social statement process. It is not easy for an entire church to address sexism, but many Lutherans are convinced God calls us to do just that.

The ELCA 2009 Churchwide Assembly called for a social statement on justice for women; through this vote the ELCA formally and institutionally further embraced its responsibility to address sexism theologically. Beginning in 2012, people across the country spent years studying, deliberating, and writing. The task force appointed by the ELCA Church Council named itself the Women and Justice: One in Christ task force, and it is the name by which the entire process became known. At the heart of the final social statement, "Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action," stands a Lutheran paradox of faith, that through faith a Christian is simultaneously free and bound.

Five hundred years ago, in 1520, Luther wrote "The Freedom of a Christian," in which he explains not only what utter dependence upon God looks like, but also what it means for daily life and where it leads. Through faith, Luther argued, a Christian is subject to nothing and subject to all. Nothing is able to rule the

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salvation of a Christian because only God claims this priority. At the very same time, Christians, because of our oneness with Jesus Christ, are servants of all people who need us; we are bound to their needs. In part, according to "Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action," Christian freedom means people are free from the demands of a patriarchal social system because it is God alone who directs our lives, not rules, structures, and systems that wreak inequity, harm, and death. At the same time, when thinking about gender justice, Christian service to neighbors means critically analyzing the conditions people endure because of patriarchy and sexism.

Luther described Christian service to the neighbor as love for the neighbor; in the social statement, the ELCA describes service to the neighbor—people we know and people we will never meet—as *justice* for the neighbor because justice is a form of love in society.<sup>2</sup> Feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether decades ago described sin as interpersonal, social-historical, and ideological-cultural. The ELCA lands squarely within this analysis for reasons tied to Luther's paradoxical understanding of faith and our relationships with self and others. Patriarchy and sexism are sins because they dishonor and harm the neighbor.

Addressing sexism through a Lutheran understanding of the freedom of a Christian is not simply the pragmatics of respect for women and girls. It is not simply about being nice to women and girls. Rather, it is a symbolic reordering and a reorientation of how we understand sex, gender, and sexuality theologically. Addressing sexism—and patriarchy—positively affects all people

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1. "ELCA Position Description," for Director, Justice for Women (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2011), 1.

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2. See "Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action" (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2019), 2021.

of all genders, men and boys, women and girls, queer and non-binary individuals.

Addressing sexism is serious work, and it can be challenging because it is so easy to deny that patriarchy and sexism are problematic and so easy to resist making significant changes. So, where do we go from here? Do we simply rely on ourselves to foster neighbor justice? As a Christian, I am convinced that God spurs our imaginations. We live and move and have our being through the Triune God. We are grounded in hope because of God's promises—to claim us, to be with us, to renew all of creation, including us. I think this is the eschatological reality we find ourselves in. And this “we” certainly includes the fields of Christian academics.

The social statement not only relies on academic work, but it also points to further areas for exploration and development—because of eschatological hope and imagination. This social statement points to the needs in Christianity for scholars to engage and extend theologies that concern human beings, such as theological anthropology; the doctrine of the Incarnation; the Sacraments; theologies of sex, gender, and sexuality; and sin and forgiveness.

“Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action” also points to the needs in Christianity to pay more attention to and further develop theology that deals with systems, whether they be religious, social, symbolic, or institutional. According to the social statement, the only way to do such theology well is with an intersectional analysis, an approach that takes as its starting point the complexities of the ways systems of oppression intersect and result in a myriad of realities for human beings. Womanists, Latinx, *mujerista*, queer, Black, and liberation theologians have long analyzed and organized for intersecting methodologies that forefront theories and experiences of race, class, nationality, ability, gender, and sexuality. Kimberlé Crenshaw coined this work as “intersectional” analysis,<sup>3</sup> and many religious scholars now rely upon it. Christians need to use this approach because it serves neighbors.

Likewise, educational institutions are systems, as are the structures and governing bodies of Christian denominations. The social statement and the accompanying implementing resolutions call on institutions to change systemic injustices, from compensation to harassment and violence policies and protocols to hiring to the practices of syllabi, classroom pedagogy, and scholarly citation. No habit of institutions is free from the ongoing need for people to assess it from the perspective of how the neighbor—students, faculty and staff members, and the wider community—is affected by the institutional system. For example, administrations of Christian institutions are “bound” in Christ to assess responses to sexual assault and harassment in a Christ-

3. Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum* (1989): 139167.

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centered manner.<sup>4</sup> In the realm of research and teaching, there are opportunities to address sexism from an intersectional perspective. One initiative from ELCA Justice for Women is an upcoming searchable database of Works in Religion by Lutheran Women, which will provide free access to entries of scholarly, pastoral, ministerial, and pedagogical writing in the Lutheran traditions of the Lutheran World Federation member churches.<sup>5</sup> This project is but one tool to help shift scholarship, teaching, and dialogue.

Perhaps the most challenging area to engage in theological systems is symbol systems, specifically with language and images of God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. The ELCA acknowledges the situation in the social statement:

Moving beyond exclusive language and imagery [for God] presents a complex challenge, both personally and communally. Changing or expanding Christian symbolism may be both unsettling and life-giving. . . . Despite the complexity, this church urges Christians to work together to confront the problem of exclusive language and imagery because these contribute significantly to patriarchal religious beliefs and practices.<sup>6</sup>

People with different training, experience, and vocations have a variety of perspectives on the issue of language and images for God. Some of the perspectives are divergent, yet the social statement “call[s] upon leaders and members to enlarge the dialogue about and practice of inclusive [all genders] and expansive [including non-human] language and images for God.”<sup>7</sup> To underscore the point, the social statement does not propose eliminating all masculine pronouns or titles typically affiliated with men. It calls for more words and images, and it calls for serious research and dialogue on the androcentrism of the Christian tradition, including symbols.<sup>8</sup>

4. See, e.g., Mary J. Streufert, “Solus Christus within Empire: Christology in the Face of Violence against Women,” in *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 53:3 (Fall 2014): 223232.

5. The database will be public by autumn 2020 and will be accessed through [www.elca.org/justiceforwomen](http://www.elca.org/justiceforwomen).

6. “Faith, Sexism, and Justice,” 54.

7. *Ibid.*, 55.

8. For one example of Lutheran scholarship on language, see *Currents in Theology and Mission*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (2016), <http://www.currentsjournal.org/index.php/currents/issue/view/4> (accessed February 20, 2020).

Other aspects of language affect Christian scholarship and life, as well, and require scholarly and ecclesial care. To state some of them briefly, inclusive biblical translation and interpretation matter. How Luther's writings are translated and interpreted matters. And lastly, for example, who is translated and into which languages among contemporary scholars also matters. Scholars have so much good work to pursue!

My undergraduate alma mater's motto is "*In luce tua videmus lucem*—In Thy Light, We See Light." Not only is education for God's glory, it is done in the daring freedom of having already been redeemed. As a student, I learned the confidence to ask any question and to follow daring lines of thought because of my confidence in God's grace for me. What if this motto could serve as a reminder of the confidence in Jesus Christ that all Christians have, especially when it comes to talking about language and images for God? What would it look like to talk with each other, to serve each other as neighbors, within and across scholarly, liturgical, ecclesial, and congregational spheres about this difficult subject if we were grounded in such Christ-centered fearlessness? My hope is that such a starting point would soften the metaphorical and literal shouting into true listening and speaking.

God is already at work. Since 2013, the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) has had a "Gender Justice Policy."<sup>9</sup> As a member church of this global communion, the ELCA relies on the global commitments and guidance in this policy to collaborate with partners around the world. The policy also calls on each member church to do its own contextualized work, and the recent social statement is one example of this contextualized work. In addition, the World Council of Churches (WCC), to which the ELCA also belongs, will vote on a gender justice policy in the near future, and as partner with the LWF, the WCC has drawn on the work already done by global Lutherans to speak theologically and to act locally. That many Christians globally are committing themselves to serve neighbors by actively working for gender justice does not mean it is without contention, however.

Ecumenical dialogues on theologies of sex, gender, and sexuality are another significant area of challenge that might well be centered in the confidence in Jesus Christ expressed in the motto "In Thy Light, We See Light." Many Christian bodies have long been in ecumenical dialogues over key theological agreements and disagreements. Dialogues on disagreements over sex, gender, and sexuality do not occur very often, and when they do, they are usually painful and divisive. For example, some Christian bodies teach that women are valuable yet secondary to men, particularly in ecclesial and familial hierarchies. Through "Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action," the ELCA has a different perspective. What good might happen for all people if Christians in ecumenical dialogues set this conversation as part of the priorities for the next 100 years? I hope that God spurs our imaginations in this direction, even if we cannot see the outcome at the moment.

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9. "Gender Justice Policy," ed. Elaine Neuenfeldt (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 2013), <https://wicas.lutheranworld.org/content/gender-justice-policy-141-1> (accessed February 20, 2020).

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Not knowing the outcome of truly loving the neighbor often feels daring. When we listen to what someone else needs, individuals and communities and sectors of society alike, we set aside our control of the situation. We set aside knowing the outcome. Thinking about this leads back to thinking with Luther, who so emphasized trust in God that he talked about it as the central relationship we have with God. Not trusting God to be faithful is, for Luther, the greatest of sins.<sup>10</sup> There is a connection here among trust in God, neighbors, imagination, and the future. In the 1980s the ELCA knew it needed to address racism and sexism. The people voting, in a sense, affirmed their trust in God because they did not know where justice for neighbors would lead. It led, in part, to 2019. The assembly in 2019 voted to set the course further, for example, by committing the ELCA to God's desire that all people, no matter one's gender, race or ethnicity, ability, sexuality, age, or education, flourish. In the daring freedom of God's grace and through the confidence that we are freed to serve others by asking difficult questions, the ELCA now sets the course for the future. And this future is God's ongoing work.

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10. See Martin Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian," trans. Mark D. Tranvik (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 6061.