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# One Perspective on ‘Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action’ as a Beacon of Gospel Hope for the ELCA

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## The challenge

“**F**aith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action,” the social statement adopted at the 2019 ELCA Churchwide Assembly, is an aspirational document. As such it is full of promise of beloved community that is consistent with the gospel of Jesus Christ. My deepest desire is that we take seriously that this is a “call to action.” Thus, we are not content to put this social statement on a shelf, we are active in pursuing justice for all people in all their diversity.

When we started this work in 2012, I was unsure of how we would accomplish a social statement to address this complex topic. Certainly, as a woman of color rostered in this church, I am intimately aware of the disparity between women—especially women of color of African descent—and men in both church and society. With that knowledge and lived experience, the call for the church to address this seemed especially daunting. Back then, society had not taken the shift of bringing women’s justice issues to the fore, especially around sexual harassment and workplace equity, and the idea of dealing with intersectionality in these things was not even on the table. However, as we moved forward in this work, society has undergone a shift in awareness if not in action—the re-election of a black president notably by the vote of women, a woman nominated for president by a major political party, and the #MeToo movement, to name three such shifts.

Our work flourished in the sweet spot of this shifting societal awareness. The task force, which I co-chaired with Brad Wendel, was bold enough not just to name the sins of patriarchy and sexism, but also named how intersectionality functioned within those sins exacerbating the oppression of over half of God’s creation. I hear hope in the fundamental teachings of the social statement that acknowledges God’s desire for abundant life for all. That is the concept of beloved community that I have taught and preached for my entire ministerial career. Being beloved community acknowledges as fact that God’s love for each of us has implications for how we walk together as God’s people. Thus, it is vital that the church acts in such a way that all people may experience dignity and abundant life and see themselves and others as beloved children of God. This doctrine has been integral to my call as a minister of Word and Sacrament, as a settled parish pastor, as an interim minister and even as a bishop of a synod. We need to be beloved community loving and valuing each other as God loves

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and values us. That is loving the neighbor as oneself. In a *Killing Rage: Ending Racism*, bell hooks is quoted as saying, “Beloved community is formed not by the eradication of difference but by its affirmation, by each of us claiming the identities and cultural legacies that shape who we are and how we live in the world.” In addressing intersectionality in this social statement dealing with the sin and injustice of patriarchy and sexism, we affirm this claiming of identities of women and girls in all their diversity as part of God’s desire for fullness of life and equity for everyone. The way this social statement calls that out brings promise of newness for the church being church rather than social club.

In the section addressing the analysis of the problem, Articles 9 and 10 address this clearly. This premise is of such importance that I include these articles in their entirety.

*9) Though God desires fullness of life and equity for everyone, as a church we recognize that women and girls in particular suffer a range of harm and injustice due to sex (biological), gender, or both. In addition to sex and gender, the experiences of individuals and groups are shaped and complicated by intersecting factors. These include race, ethnicity, national origin, nationality (including American Indian and Alaska Native), religious identity, immigration status, sexuality, marital status, economic means, age, ability, embodied experiences, and education. This reality is known*

*as intersectionality. This statement's references to women and girls are intended to be inclusive of all people who identify as women or girls in the diversity of their individual and communal identities and expressions.*

*10) The experiences of women and girls from a variety of backgrounds, both in the past and in the present moment, reveal that they have often been restricted in realizing abundant life on the basis of sex (biological) or gender.*

### Core theological convictions

This is a gospel document. Beginning with the Fundamental Teaching section, we are reminded that God desires abundant life for all, a central doctrine of the Lutheran heritage which we hold sacred. This section continues with the other doctrines of faith we hold dear.

*1) ... God's intention revealed through the Scriptures is that all people have life abundantly and flourish.*

*2) ... all people are created equally in the image of God. Every individual is dependent upon God, and all share in the God-given vocation to contribute their gifts to help all of creation flourish. Being in the image of the triune God means that we humans are relational, that we are interconnected... We are reminded that sin alienates us from God and one another. It is only by grace, through faith in Jesus, that we can overcome sin.*

*3) ... humans exist in a state of sin. Because we fail to trust God as we should, we are alienated from God, from other people, and from creation itself.*

*4) We believe that we are healed and redeemed from this alienation... justified by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ, no matter what we have done or left undone... we are freed from bondage to the people and things we trust and love more than God or the ways we try to justify ourselves, sometimes at the expense of others... God's grace frees us and empowers us to love others as God loves all of creation.*

Paramount for our work in the various entities of this church body is that the social statement acknowledges patriarchy and sexism as sin. For some that is a radical concept. Some see it as a political rather than gospel statement, however if we are unable to speak the truth of this, we are unlikely to turn the corner to be the church we are called to be. In adopting this social statement, we have affirmed the truth that we continue to live tied to the sin of patriarchy and sexism. The statement speaks the truth in love for this church body. Just as Jesus called out the religious institution of his day, so by this statement we call out the truth of our institution. We confess where we have fallen short and commit to atoning by moving into new behaviors. It is basic to what we

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understand our gospel call to be.

*5) Our focus as Lutheran Christians of Jesus Christ affects how this church understands the call to do justice. Because we are freed in Christ for others, we are able to respond to God's call to love our neighbor as ourselves. In society, neighbor love takes the form of neighbor justice.*

*6) This focus on Jesus Christ also affects how we understand the Scriptures. While the Scriptures speak both Law and Gospel, Martin Luther emphasized that the Scriptures should be read by paying attention to what proclaims Christ—what carries the Gospel message of God's grace and mercy to all people.*

*We are rooted in scripture and see a clarion call for neighbor justice. The struggle for us is discerning how we enact neighbor justice in our daily lives. This document gives us rooting for that call and direction for accomplishing full inclusion of women and girls across the spectrum of the intersections of their lives.*

*7) ... the scriptural call to neighbor justice is clear; human reason and knowledge are essential to discern the specific forms, policies, and structures that best enable us to enact justice in particular contexts. Recognizing that the gifts of reason and knowledge are given to people of all religions and worldviews, Christians are freed to work together with them for the common good.*

### How to use the social statement

As a rostered leader who has served in various expressions of this church, I appreciate the way the social statement's format helps shape the accessibility of the study to the diverse constituents

within our various expressions. Being available as two versions, the Short Statement and the Full Statement, is a gift which allows for constituents to enter at the level of commitment that is comfortable for them. The task force recommended that people start with the Short Statement and grow deeper as they are moved by the Spirit. There is a glossary to assist studiers to be on the same page, so to speak, in understanding the terms used in the document. This makes the document accessible in ways that we have not seen in earlier social statements. The Full Statement expands upon the framework in the Short Statement, allowing the reader to delve deeper in places as they are moved by the Spirit. The same sections and articles are present in each version, just in more depth in the Full Statement.

*Section I Fundamental Teaching: God desires abundant life for all. Articles 1-8*

*Section II Analysis of the Problem: Sin subverts human flourishing in many ways. Articles 9-15*

*Section III The Christian Tradition: It is both challenge and resource. Articles 16-22*

*Section IV Response: The ELCA is called to new commitments and action as a church. Articles 23-30*

*Section V Response: The ELCA calls for action and new commitments in society. Articles 31-40*

I contend it is important for those who study this social statement to start with the Preface—A Shared Vision: We trust God's promises and we hope for justice, found on pages 12-14, and end with Conclusion A Shared Challenge: Living in hope, we are called to action, found on page 68, whether they intend to work with the Short Statement or the Full Statement. The preface sets the stage for study of the social statement and the conclusion helps to move us to look at the ways we can accomplish full inclusion through the implementing resolutions.

As in other recent social statements, a real gift for using this social statement in the places where I serve rests beyond the social statement's clear case to reject the sin of patriarchy and sexism,

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I feel a sense of hope for the future of the ELCA as we move forward with the Implementing Resolutions for the social statement "Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action." Indeed, we are called to action. This is a document to be used in our daily walk as Christians of the Lutheran brand who are called to be beloved community in Christ.

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in its commitment to live as the body of Christ in a world which continues to struggle with the realities of sin. This is expressed clearly and concisely in *Article 8*. . . . *we recognize that acting justly within family, church, and society for the common good is central to the vocation to which God calls all people. . . .*" It is in the Implementing Resolutions which were also adopted at the 2019 ELCA Assembly. These resolutions give concrete strategies for achieving our goals. In these resolutions each entity and level of this church has concrete ways of addressing the problems of patriarchy and sexism and eradicating them. Not only does the social statement provide a framework, it provides accountability.

In conclusion, I feel a sense of hope for the future of the ELCA as we move forward with the Implementing Resolutions for the social statement "Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action." Indeed, we are called to action. This is a document to be used in our daily walk as Christians of the Lutheran brand who are called to be beloved community in Christ. I pray we are ready to move beyond mere words that sound good into action to eradicate the sins of patriarchy and sexism in all of their intersections and truly be the people that God has called us to be—walking in the Spirit—lovers of God and each other, truly walking the talk that says God loves all of us whatever our condition and we will do the same.