

---

# Thought-Provoking and Action-Promoting: A Response to the ELCA Gender Justice Document

---

Wanda Deifelt

*Professor of Religion, Luther College*

Prior to the approval of the document “Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action” at the ELCA 2019 Churchwide Assembly, I was invited to lead an adult forum on its earlier version at Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, in Decorah, Iowa, the congregation I attend. The excitement over the text and the positive reaction of the participants were at the same time surprising and intriguing to me.

Many members voiced the urgency of the document. In light of so much available information, one could ponder why a document, written in the context of the Lutheran church, would be relevant. After all, haven’t feminist, womanist, mujerista, and queer perspectives on culture and religion been a hallmark of classroom conversations? Doesn’t the news—or media in general—offer visibility on issues of gender identity, the intersection of race, sex, and class? Have we not developed at least an awareness of “politically correct” discourse when talking about human bodies, sexuality, age, physical mobility, and mental abilities?

Yes—but while all of these statements are true, they just don’t seem to come across! There could be many reasons for this. Perhaps we are bound by our own echo chambers (which only allow us to hear opinions similar to ours) or there is just too much information out there that it becomes overwhelming to discern what is true or false. It could be that the overexposure to violence and abuses toward other human beings and nature desensitizes us, making us numb toward suffering and other people’s feelings. Maybe apathy is the response of a mentality of self-preservation, when we become overwhelmed by everything that is wrong in the world and our reaction is paralysis. Or the opposite might be the case, that instead of paralysis caused by empathy we just don’t want to get involved because we really don’t care.

Whatever the reason for our current state of affairs might be, it is evident that the church has a role to play in helping us bridge divides and reminding us of the ongoing need of hearing the gospel in light of our current challenges. “Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action” brings us back to our common human roots (as children of God), presents an analysis of the challenges we face, and invites transformative action.

This is one of the many outstanding reflections of the document: that Christians have a call, a vocation to be part of the world, to be prophetic witnesses that denounce injustices

---

**I**t is evident that the church has a role to play in helping us bridge divides and reminding us of the ongoing need of hearing the gospel in light of our current challenges. “Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action” brings us back to our common human roots (as children of God), presents an analysis of the challenges we face, and invites transformative action.

---

and announce the good news. The reality of sin and brokenness permeates our souls, minds, bodies, communities, and society. This sin also takes the shape of sexism, homophobia, and hatred toward people whose gender identity does not conform to binary roles. The church has a responsibility to critically reflect on the many shapes sin is manifested, and from there announce the possibility of conversion (a turning around of our hearts and minds), of making amends and striving to live better and bolder in light of God’s grace. In doing so, we are invited to witness God’s love for us, one another, and for the entire creation.

The church has a commitment to preach the good news and show its impact in people’s lives. In this, the document fully addresses the categories of orthodoxy (right teachings, with a theology rooted in the biblical tradition and Lutheran heritage), orthopraxy (right living, with a vision of the church as a body involved in those social and cultural practices that foment change), and orthopathy (right affections, with a heart that is motivated not by division but by compassion and solidarity). It is not enough to have the best theology if it does not translate into action, nor have the greatest grassroots work without consideration for the brokenness of human existence, or even the most successful

congregational growth if the gospel is not preached.

I was surprised by the excitement about the text, given that the ELCA (and its preceding bodies) has such a long tradition of biblical and theological reflection, mission work, and advocacy that is attentive to social and economic inequalities. It made me ponder: what happens to the social statements and educational materials that are available to members and congregations? What kind of reception, if any, do these materials receive? One of the beauties of the social statement is that it draws from and builds on these previous works, amply referencing them. After all, addressing the social hierarchies that diminish the worth and dignity of life is one of our ongoing missions.

My own journey into the world of religious studies and theology was made possible because of this vision. Way back in the 1980s, the women of The American Lutheran Church (one of the founding bodies of the ELCA) got a motion approved that the church should secure scholarships for women from the global south to pursue further education, so they could be equipped to teach and contribute to their churches in this capacity. Three scholarships were to be awarded—one for Asia, another for Africa, and finally one for Latin America. Along with Esther Tse (from Hong Kong), I was one of the recipients (from Brazil). There was no woman from Africa because, apparently, no bishop had shown interest in advertising the scholarship back home.

I share this personal vignette to illustrate that gender justice is part of a long-standing theological and ecclesial tradition, but similar to Sisyphus, we seem to be doomed to repeating the same actions over and over, hoping for a better outcome. Sisyphus, we recall, was a Greek king whose punishment was to push a large rock up a steep hill, only to find it rolling back once he got near the top. Our times seem rather Sisyphian, considering that in so many contexts the rocks of our social, political, cultural, and ecclesial advancements seem to be rolling back, crushing the lives of so many.

Yet, many rocks have been moved and impediments to human flourishing removed. Take, for instance, women's access to the ballot. In 2020, the United States will commemorate the centennial of the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution, guaranteeing and protecting women's constitutional right to vote. Women's suffrage was a tremendous expansion of democracy in the history of the U.S. Its merits cannot be overlooked and its achievements taken for granted.

There is urgency in promoting and advocating gender justice, but why should such a thought-provoking and action-promoting

---

**G**ender justice is part of a long-standing theological and ecclesial tradition, but similar to Sisyphus, we seem to be doomed to repeating the same actions over and over, hoping for a better outcome. . . . Yet, many rocks have been moved and impediments to human flourishing removed.

---

document come out of a church setting when there are so many non-governmental organizations and initiatives in civil society that already tackle matters of gender justice? Because the church can congregate people around Word and Sacrament, it can meet people in their vulnerability, it can speak across the divide, and it can be the place where conversations about difficult topics happen in an environment of love instead of hatred.

The excitement about "Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action" also stems from its intersectional approach, bringing together many of the texts and topics previously discussed (racism, reproductive rights, immigration, etc.). This is certainly not a re-hashing of what has already been said and done. Rather, by using intersectionality as a framework for the entire document, it is possible to establish connections between different experiences and realities (the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender, for example). By pointing out the overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage, the document does not prioritize one initiative over another. Rather, a conversation can start on issues of toxic masculinity and branch out to address white privilege, or it can reflect on gender identity and the support needed for transgender or bisexual people while also celebrating the contributions of women (from biblical times to the present). These overlapping approaches are not mutually exclusive. They apply to individuals and groups in our congregations. Their stories are an invitation for the community of faith to celebrate its diversity, the diversity within the body of Christ.