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## Introduction to This Issue

# Living Out and Learning From ‘Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action’ – The 2019 Social Statement of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

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In 2009 the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) authorized the development of a new social statement on justice for women in church and society. In response, ELCA staff convened a diverse national task force comprised of ELCA lay persons, clergy, academics from ELCA institutions, and bishops to engage in in-depth study, challenging conversations, prayer, and creation of the new document. Early on the task force discerned that “justice for women” was too narrow a way to frame the issue. First, the language of justice “for” women seemed to diminish women’s agency. Second, the root problem underlying the concern is sexism, a system that harms *people* (not just women) on the basis of sex, gender, and sexual orientation. Over a period of seven years, the task force studied the many ways that sexism negatively impacts women and girls—as well as men and boys—in church and society. The task force created a study resource addressing sexism, distributed a draft of a social statement for input from ELCA members and congregations, and gathered and analyzed feedback. The task force then crafted “Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action,” which was approved by 97 percent of voting members at the 2019 ELCA Churchwide Assembly in Milwaukee.

As members of the social statement task force and writing team, we had the great privilege of participating in this challenging and transformative process. With the task force’s work now complete, the challenge before us all—ELCA lay members, staff, deacons, clergy, and bishops—is to call out the sins of sexism where we see them, live out the statement’s compelling vision of neighbor justice, and ensure the fulfillment of the abundant and equitable life that God intends for all creation.

“Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action” frames sexism in the following way: “The far-reaching harm experienced by women and girls is rooted in a pattern of power, privilege, and prejudice, the key elements in any social system of oppression. This is the basis of the ELCA’s understanding of racism. When power, privilege, and prejudice are associated with sex, gender, and sexuality, sociologists use the terms patriarchy and sexism” (“Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action,” 4).

The social statement then calls all persons to work for gender justice for neighbor (and self) by building on Martin Luther’s deep commitment that the heart of the Christian’s life is service to the neighbor. “Love of neighbor is expressed in seeking justice for the neighbor. This includes gender justice. Gender justice is for all people and requires particular attention to seeking fuller

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justice for women and girls. Because we rely on God as a God of promise, this church speaks about sexism and the harm it causes for all people” (“Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call for Action,” 14).

This issue of *Currents in Theology and Mission* focuses on this historic social statement through reflections, insights, and recommendations by ELCA pastors, professors, deacons, lay leaders, and others from a variety of fields. These writers help locate the social statement within the larger context of Lutheran theology and ministry, describe its powerful impact on their own lives and work, share the ways they intend to use the statement in their ministry, and suggest strategies for using its tools and resources to combat sexism and patriarchy.

The articles in this issue are organized into thematic units. The opening article by **Mary J. Streufert** contains a reflection on the significance of the social statement. The next group of articles (by **Ramshaw, Lundblad, Tangen, Culver, and Nesson**) offer concrete examples and ideas that clergy and church leaders can use to bring the insights of “Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action” into their own preaching and congregational life. The articles by **Wallace, Rodriguez, and Lowe** locate the social statement within larger philosophical and theological conversations about race, sex/gender, and ethics. In the final group of articles (by **Thomas-Breitfeld, Crist, Garcia, and Deifelt**), each author responds to the social statement from their own narrative and

social location. These reflections highlight what some see as the strengths and weaknesses of the social statement.

**Mary J. Streufert** locates “Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action” within the context of ecumenical and global Lutheran partnerships. She writes that gender justice is a faithful, trusting response to God’s gracious call to serve our neighbors in Christian freedom.

**Gail Ramshaw** advocates widening and deepening the language we use to address and describe God. She explains why this is a worthy goal and offers rich suggestions and practical resources for expanding our language to and about God.

**Barbara Lundblad** suggests that the best way to utilize “Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action” in preaching is to focus on themes within the social statement and to ask questions within these sermons that relate to the statement’s commitment to justice.

**Nicholas Tangen** writes from his experience working with youth and young adults. He describes the power of naming the sin of sexism, and how the social statement’s use of the concept of intersectionality deepens conversations with young people and helps them name the challenges they face and hear the gospel in ways that are meaningful to them.

**Sister Liz Colver**, a community organizer, reflects on the Christian call to challenge unjust systems and offers specific suggestions for congregations to dismantle sexist practices and understandings.

**Craig L. Nesson** offers case studies written by his ethics students as part of a Science for Seminaries grant to Wartburg Theological Seminary from the American Association for the Advancement of Science. The first case is based on “Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action,” followed by four other cases based on ELCA social statements. He demonstrates how these social statements can be powerful tools for education and ministry with young adults and congregational members.

**Beverly Wallace** calls upon ELCA Lutherans to deepen our commitment to justice by listening to the perspectives of women of color—especially womanist theologians. She demonstrates that it is essential to invoke black women’s stories and memories to advance the work of the social statement, deepen its call for action, and empower the theology of hope it presents.

**William Rodriguez** explores the philosophical and biblical understandings of justice underlying the social statement’s commitment to gender justice and neighbor justice, as well as the ways in which these views of justice are essential for a society committed to the common good.

**Mary Elise Lowe** demonstrates how the social statement is solidly grounded in Lutheran commitments to the diversity of creation, neighbor justice, and the body of Christ. She contends that its expansive welcome is informed by three significant shifts in the way theologians, scientists, and theorists now view sex, gender, and sexuality.

**Viviane Thomas-Breitfeld**, who served as co-chair of the Women and Justice: One in Christ social statement task force, reflects on “Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action” as an aspirational call to work toward and live into beloved community.

**Jessica Crist** reflects on the significance of the ELCA making a public commitment to stand against sexism and patriarchy. She argues that the social statement matters because it is our church’s declaration that patriarchy is no longer acceptable, and that as Christians, we are all called to act.

**Nicole M. Garcia** offers a pastoral and personal reflection on “Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action,” artfully describing how she heard echoes of her own story in the document, and the gospel promise that all are created equally in the image of God.

**Wanda Deifelt** connects the new insights within “Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action” to her own theological journey and highlights how the intersectional analysis of the statement aligns with the Lutheran church’s ministry of Word and Sacrament.

This issue’s “Listening to Immigrant Voices” selection is a paraphrase of Psalm 137, authored by **Joan M. Maruskin**, retired from Church World Service Immigration and Refugee Program, and titled “By the Waters of the Rio Grande.”

In the *Currents Focus* feature, **Benjamin Taylor** articulates how Luther’s theology, as a “theology of otherness,” serves to critique the dominant logic of modernity. Three themes in Luther’s theology—theology of the cross, the doctrine of justification, and the notion of the hiddenness of God—provide ground for theological and ethical resistance to these forms of oppression.

This issue of “Preaching Helps” honors the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the ordination of women among Lutherans in North America, as well as the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the ordination of women of color. To mark these anniversaries, all the writers for “Preaching Helps” are ELCA clergy women: parish pastors, bishops, campus pastors, professors, synod and churchwide staff members and women retired but still doing ministry. Thanks be to God for all of them!

We are grateful for the education and advocacy efforts that have been undertaken and will continue to be generated through the social statement, “Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action,” to repair the harm done through sexism and patriarchy and for the contributions of the authors in this issue toward neighbor justice.

*Mary Elise Lowe, Augsburg University, and  
Kathryn A. Kleinbans, Trinity Lutheran Seminary  
at Capital University, Guest Editors  
Craig L. Nesson, Issue Co-Editor*

## **Editors’ Note:**

The articles and Preaching Helps prepared for this issue were gathered prior to the health emergency we all now face with the COVID-19 crisis. We hold you in prayer as you use these materials and adapt them to emerging global and local circumstances.

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