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# A New Creation: Sex and Gender in 'Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action'

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In August of 2019, the ELCA Churchwide Assembly approved "Faith, Sexism and Justice: A Call to Action." As a member of the social statement task force and writing team, I was thrilled that the document was adopted as part of the official social teachings of the ELCA. At the assembly's closing worship service, Presiding Bishop Elizabeth A. Eaton preached about the Pentecost event. She recounted how the followers of Jesus were filled with the Holy Spirit, and how they were suspiciously received by those around them. "[O]thers sneered and said, 'They are filled with new wine.'<sup>1</sup> Bishop Eaton told the gathered assembly that they *too* might experience the same reception when they left Milwaukee and returned home to their congregations. They *too* might be perceived as "drunk" after the assembly adopted the social statement and became a sanctuary church.

Some Lutherans might view these actions as too progressive or liberal for the ELCA. In her sermon, Bishop Eaton artfully made one of the points I argue here. The assembly's move toward a neighbor-justice understanding of gender, race, and interfaith issues was not the result of political correctness. Rather, it celebrates the diversity of God's good creation, springs from the gospel, and is inspired and sustained by the Holy Spirit. Bishop Eaton said, "No one can put limits on God's grace.... These are the glimpses we've caught of the kingdom of God breaking in right now.... trying to tell the story of the Spirit's work.... the Spirit is blowing open our windows and doors this week in Milwaukee.... the Spirit has grabbed this church.... so that all might hear this message of liberation and freedom."<sup>2</sup> "Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action" offers freedom from the sin of sexism, freedom from narrow stereotypes about sex and gender, and freedom for a new way of celebrating the diversity of sex, gender, and sexuality.

Readers familiar with the ELCA's complex history of social statements on sexuality may be familiar with the 2009 social statement, "Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust."<sup>3</sup> In contrast to the 2019 statement, "Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust" did not contain any of the terms frequently used today to describe sex and

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gender identities, and it only rarely uses the words "homosexuality" and "same-gender sexual behavior." In contrast, "Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action" employs numerous identity terms that demonstrate the ELCA's openness to a variety of sex and gender identities. While this vocabulary may be familiar to some Lutherans, it is brand new to others. These terms include gender non-binary, gender non-conforming, genderqueer, intersex, non-binary, queer, and transgender. Each word is defined in the glossary, and the statement acknowledges that these preferred terms will likely change over time.<sup>4</sup>

My focus in this essay is not to defend or explore the complex meanings of these identity terms. Rather, I contend that they reflect the ELCA's new openness to a wide variety of identities, which is rooted in and springs from several familiar Lutheran theological and biblical commitments. Next, I aver that the expansive welcome of "Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action" is informed by dramatic (or seismic) shifts in the way that contemporary theologians, scientists, physicians, psychologists, and philosophers understand sex, gender, and human sexuality. To begin, I briefly describe the Lutheran commitments that inform "Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action." Then I introduce

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1. Acts 2:13.

2. "Closing Worship, ELCA Churchwide Assembly 2019," accessed January 12, 2020, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EqdXm\\_QX7AE&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EqdXm_QX7AE&feature=youtu.be).

3. "Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust" (2009), Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, accessed January 12, 2020, <https://www.elca.org/Faith/Faith-and-Society/Social-Statements/Human-Sexuality>.

4. "Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action" (2019), Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 73. Accessed, February 10, 2020, [https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Faith\\_Sexism\\_Justice\\_Social\\_Statement\\_Adopted.pdf?\\_ga=2.55360744.235422900.1582596448-1727405285.1566332692](https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Faith_Sexism_Justice_Social_Statement_Adopted.pdf?_ga=2.55360744.235422900.1582596448-1727405285.1566332692)

the new ways of understanding sex, gender, and sexuality that ground and guide the statement.

### Guiding Lutheran commitments

To begin, it is important for ELCA members, staff, clergy, and bishops to understand that the social statement's openness to diverse identities of sex and gender is solidly grounded in familiar Lutheran insights. The reality of sin, an emphasis on law and gospel, neighbor, creation, and the body of Christ are the basis for its strong commitment to justice for all people. For example, the statement clearly names sexism as both a personal and structural sin that negatively impacts women and girls—and—to a lesser degree—men—and boys. Naming sexism as a sin is rooted in the Lutheran understanding that all people are sinners who are forgiven through faith in Jesus Christ. And declaring sexism as sin is also grounded in the Lutheran commitment that naming and repenting for sin are a necessary part of the Christian dialectic of law and gospel. "Patriarchy and sexism reflect a lack of trust in God and result in harm and broken relationships. Just as this church has identified racism as sin, this church identifies patriarchy and sexism as sin."<sup>5</sup> The entire statement is informed by the commitment that all forms of sexism are sinful. In addition, the document points out the ways that many individuals who suffer under the weight of sexism also participate—to differing degrees—in sexist structures and practices. "[T]he power of patriarchy and sexism can be largely invisible. Because it is invisible, we are often unaware that everyone participates in some measure, sometimes in obvious and intentional ways and sometimes in subtle and unconscious ways."<sup>6</sup> Three additional Lutheran commitments ground the social statement's embrace of individuals who claim a variety of sex and gender identities. And like other ELCA social statements (such as "Criminal Justice and Genetics"), "Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action" is guided by contemporary scientific findings—in this case, those that relate to the complexity of human sexuality.

The next Lutheran insight that grounds the wide embrace of the social statement is the Lutheran commitment to justice for the neighbor, or what the social statement calls neighbor justice. The statement says, "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."<sup>7</sup> This clearly echoes Martin Luther's consistent teaching that the heart of the Christian life is service to the neighbor. When the social statement calls for equity for individuals who identify as genderqueer, for example, this is a call to advocate for justice for the genderqueer neighbor in the church and in the public sphere. In approving the statement, the ELCA resolved that, "all people of good will...be guided by this statement's convictions and commitments to resist and dismantle patriarchy and sexism, and to transform life in the church and in society."<sup>8</sup> This commitment is

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not some sort of political correctness. Rather, extending neighbor justice to LGBTQI persons is a way of widening the circle of welcome to individuals that the church has traditionally excluded.<sup>9</sup>

Next, "Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action" affirms Scripture's witness that God's good creation is marvelously diverse, and that this diversity includes sex, gender, and sexuality. In our current context in the United States, the term diversity is often used to primarily refer to racial diversity. The social statement, however, expands the scope of diversity. "We believe God creates humanity in diversity. Scientific research in conversation with the Christian tradition shows that this diversity encompasses a wide variety of experiences, identities, and expressions, including sex (human biology), gender (how humans understand and express themselves), and sexuality (sexual attraction)."<sup>10</sup> In "Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action," the ELCA opens its doors to individuals who claim diverse sex and gender identities such as queer and gender non-conforming, to name a few. Once again, what grounds and guides the statement is a thoroughly Lutheran approach to Scripture and a commitment that God is the creator of a diverse creation.

An additional guiding theological commitment is that Christians are embodied creatures and part of the body of Christ. "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ."<sup>11</sup> Scriptural language about the body of Christ is used consistently throughout "Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action." This language makes three important contributions to the statement. First, it reminds Lutherans that what truly unites them is not a common cultural or linguistic heritage, but rather the promise that all members are part of the body of Christ and members of one another. In addition, because the sins of sexism

5. Ibid., 5.  
6. Ibid., 38.  
7. Ibid., 20.  
8. Ibid., 81.

9. This is an abbreviation for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex. Please see "Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action" and the GLAAD Media Reference Guide for detailed definitions of these terms; GLAAD Media Reference Guide, accessed February 1, 2020, <https://www.glaad.org/reference>.

10. "Faith, Sexism, and Justice," 17.

11. 1 Corinthians 12:12.

and heterosexism have often been exacted on the bodies of women and girls, language about the body of Christ reminds ELCA members that their individual physical bodies, as well as the bodies of their neighbors, must be respected, treasured, and protected.

Paul taught that what happens to one part of the body affects every part of the body. This church seeks to value all people and recognize that we depend upon one another. We will not dominate or politicize other people but will respect them, promote their health and well-being, and suffer and rejoice together as we strive for justice for all bodies—indeed, for all persons.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, seeking neighbor justice for someone who has endured sexism, homophobia, transphobia, racism, and other intersecting forms of oppression means pursuing justice for these embodied individuals in the material world—in their homes, faith-families, places of work, and the public sphere. Being the body of Christ involves moving one's own bodies for the sake of the neighbor.

### Three seismic shifts in understanding sex and gender

I believe it will be most helpful for ELCA members, staff, leaders, and clergy to understand the broader philosophical, theoretical, and scientific insights—what I am calling seismic shifts—that inform the social statement's more contemporary view of human sexuality. (I want to clarify that I write as an independent Lutheran scholar who knows the social statement well. My analysis here does not represent the ELCA nor the views of the other task force members.)

Three shifts ground and guide the ELCA's understanding of sex, gender, and human sexuality in the social statement. They include:

- a shift from a coextensive view of sex/gender to viewing sex and gender as distinct
- a shift from an essentialist to a constructionist view of sex and gender
- a shift from a binary to a multidimensional view of sexual differentiation

The precise terms used to describe a variety of sex and gender identities are important, because they are the words that many individuals have chosen to use to affirm their own identity and claim their own place as members of the body of Christ. However, these identity terms are only *one* part of the story. Beneath and behind the vocabulary lie the three shifts I describe.<sup>13</sup>

12. "Faith, Sexism, and Justice," 24.

13. For readers who want to know more, I suggest the following texts. Meg-Jon Barker and Julia Scheele, *Queer: A Graphic History* (London: Icon Books Ltd, 2016); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Sex/Gender: Biology in a Social World* (New York: Routledge, 2012); Nikki Sullivan, *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory* (New York, New York University Press, 2003).

**R**ejecting the coextensive understanding of sex/gender and affirming that they are distinct claims to knowledge lays the groundwork for the wide welcome that the ELCA now extends to LGBTQI persons and to those whose lived experience of identity is not determined by their biology.

### From a coextensive to a distinctive view of sex and gender

It is important to recognize that the glossary of "Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action" contains one entry for the term "sex," and it contains a separate entry for the term "gender." This reflects an important shift from a coextensive view to a distinctive view of sex and gender. Growing up, I was taught that if a person had a penis, then they were a male. They would act in masculine ways and they would desire a physical and emotional relationship with a female. Conversely, a female would have a vagina, act in feminine ways, identify as a woman, and desire a male. This is a model of sex, gender, and identity that many people still adhere to today. There are two often unstated assumptions operating. The first belief is that heterosexuality is typical or normal. The second assumption is what theorists and academics call the "coextensive view of sex/gender." This is the belief that an individual's biological sex dictates their gender. Said another way, sex and gender are coextensive. Scholar Marri Mikkola writes,

Most people ordinarily seem to think that sex and gender are coextensive: women are human females, men are human males. Many feminists have historically disagreed and have endorsed the sex/gender distinction. Provisionally: "sex" denotes human females and males depending on *biological* features... "gender" denotes women and men depending on *social* factors [emphasis added].<sup>14</sup>

But as Mikkola points out, many feminist scholars and academics who study sex, gender, and human sexuality reject this coextensive view. Instead, they argue that sex and gender are separate things, and that a person's biology does not dictate their gender. This is why the social statement treats sex and gender as two distinct categories or two different ways of talking about human sexuality. Sex is (in part) defined in the statement's glossary

14. Mari Mikkola, "Feminist Perspectives on Sex and Gender," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2019 Edition), Edward N. Zalta, ed. accessed January 18, 2020. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2019/entries/feminism-gender/>

as a “scientific label assigned at birth that describes an individual’s reproductive organs and whether they have XX chromosomes (female) or XY chromosomes (male).”<sup>15</sup> Gender is defined as “Identities, roles, behaviors, and attributes that cultures, societies, and individuals shape, most often linked to femininity and masculinity.”<sup>16</sup> Rejecting the coextensive understanding of sex/gender and affirming that they are distinct claims to knowledge lays the groundwork for the wide welcome that the ELCA now extends to LGBTQI persons and to those whose lived experience of identity is not determined by their biology.

When the social statement treats sex and gender as distinct, it reveals several important things. First—like other ELCA social statements—it relies on more than just theology and Scripture to guide its teachings. These are certainly authoritative, but the document employs insights from the sciences as well. And this is consistent with the broader historic Lutheran commitment to use the sciences as one (of several) ways that humans pursue to understand God’s diverse creation. Separating sex from gender also illustrates how the social statement frames the multiplicity of sex and gender identities as part of the diversity of God’s creation. Treating sex and gender as distinct also reflects the document’s commitment to neighbor justice. As it points out, many people have been oppressed by patriarchal sexist structures because their own expressions of sex and gender do not align with the dominant view that sex/gender are coextensive. And because of this, these individuals have suffered discrimination and injustice in the church and the world. Finally, viewing sex and gender as distinct also resonates with the statement’s commitment that all are members of the body of Christ, that each member of this body is unique, and that all need one another. “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, the shift from a coextensive view to a distinct view of sex and gender resonates with several important Lutheran commitments.

### From essentialism to constructionism

The social statement takes an approach to sex and gender that can be described as a constructionist approach. (This approach can also be referred to as social constructionism or constructivism.) Constructionism is different from the familiar essentialist view. Many individuals have been raised to believe that each person possesses some sort of “essence” that is profoundly shaped or largely determined by their biology (and sometimes gender). For example, if someone is biologically “female” they are said to have a female nature or a female essence. (Remember the 1992 book, *Men are from Mars and Women are from Venus*?) A person’s biology determines their gender. In academic language this coextensive view of sex/gender is often called essentialism, which “refers to the belief in natural or innate differences between men and women.

**This move to constructionism also aligns with the statement’s commitment that God’s creation is wonderfully diverse. There is no one ideal or typical way of living as a female or a male or as an intersex person, no matter one’s gender and identity. And once again, the shift to constructionism resonates with the promise that all people are members of the diverse body of Christ.**

Essentialism rejects the view that gender differences are socially constructed.<sup>18</sup> In addition, essentialism can also refer to the belief that a person possesses an essence that is either homosexual or heterosexual.

In contrast, the social statement takes a constructionist approach. The basic premise is that individuals do not possess or merely express some sort of masculine/male, feminine/female, or gay/straight essence. Rather, identity itself is constructed. “[C]onstructionists assume identity is fluid, the effect of social conditioning... [and] culture-dependent, relational and, perhaps, non-objective.”<sup>19</sup> One’s identity is profoundly constructed by factors such as language, science, medicine, family, and by expectations surrounding sex, gender, and sexuality. Therefore, what a culture or an individual identifies as feminine behavior or a female essence is largely constructed. This commitment to constructionism is seen in the social statement’s definition of gender, which emphasizes how cultural and social stereotypes and expectations construct an individual’s sex and gender identity.

The shift from essentialism to constructionism grounds the statement’s openness to individuals who identify as gender non-conforming, gender non-binary, genderqueer, intersex, non-binary, queer, and transgender. As the document states, too many women and girls, men and boys, suffer under the oppressive expectations of what is considered appropriate or typical for females and males and what is an acceptable expression of one’s supposedly feminine

15. Ibid., 80.

16. “Faith, Sexism, and Justice,” 76.

17. 1 Cor 12:26.

18. *The Routledge Critical Dictionary of Feminism and Postmodernism*, Sarah Gamble, ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 225.

19. Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 8. Another author defines the social constructionist perspective this way: “The opposing view, known as *social constructionism*, holds that our concepts of sexual identity are shaped by the society we live in.” *Bisexual Politics: Theories, Queries, & Visions*, Naomi Tucker, ed. with Liz Highleyman and Rebecca Kaplan (New York: Harrington Park Press, 1995), 74.



or masculine essence. Helping individuals and groups break free from stereotypes is a way of seeking justice for the neighbor. And a key step in liberating people from sexist structures involves naming the underlying assumptions (such as essentialism) that ground these stereotypes and sexist structures. This move to constructionism also aligns with the statement's commitment that God's creation is wonderfully diverse. There is no one ideal or typical way of living as a female or a male or as an intersex person, no matter one's gender and identity. And once again, the shift to constructionism resonates with the promise that all people are members of the diverse body of Christ. Finally, (as I will discuss next) the constructionist view creates a space for individuals who identify as bisexual, gender non-binary, genderqueer, intersex, and transgender. These individuals are no longer obligated to live within a system that forces them to identify as female/feminine, male/masculine, or to live out some sort of binary female or male essence that is an expression of (coextensive) sex/gender. All people can find and form their own identities as unique children of God and honored members of the body of Christ.

### From a binary to a multi-dimensional view of sexual differentiation

For neighbors who identify as bisexual, gay, gender non-conforming, gender non-binary, genderqueer, intersex, lesbian, non-binary, queer, and transgender, there is yet a third important shift reflected in the social statement's commitment to gender justice. Today, many scientists and sex and gender theorists no longer view biological sex as being either female OR male. They have shifted away from viewing biological, sexual differentiation as binary (female/male). Recently two new perspectives on biological sex have emerged. The first is that biological sex (and gender) exist on a continuum. The second holds that sex (and gender) are best understood as points in a multidimensional space. Individuals who read the social statement closely may have encountered a word that is new to them—intersex. This is “a term for a variety of conditions people are born with: physical characteristics, anatomy, and/or genes that vary from standards set by doctors' expectations for being “female” or “male.” The term refers to the fact of biological variation among humans.”<sup>20</sup> The social statement has moved beyond the essentialist, binary, and continuum views of sex and gender, and it employs a multidimensional view of sexual differentiation.

In the 1990s it was very common to hear progressive thinkers and theologians argue that sex and gender could be viewed as continuums. One continuum placed feminine and masculine at the opposite ends; supposedly everyone fit somewhere on the continuum and possessed some masculine and some feminine traits. Another was the same-sex and opposite-sex continuum in which (supposedly) everyone lived between the extremes of gay (at one end) and straight (at the other end). “Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action” goes beyond this view of sex, gender, and

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identity as a continuum, and instead it frames sex (and gender) as multidimensional.

[T]his statement draws on the results of current scientific research as a basis for our work. A scientific consensus now holds that there are more than two biological sexes and more than two genders. Studies of humans reveal rich diversity, showing that individuals do not neatly fall into two categories. Some people are intersex: their bodies are neither male nor female. People have a diversity of characteristics, most of which cannot be assigned exclusively to one sex or gender or another. Among humans, sex and gender are more accurately characterized as multidimensional.<sup>21</sup>

The use of the term “multidimensional” may be surprising to some. This language is employed by Anne Fausto-Sterling, who has demonstrated how many supposedly “objective” studies of sex and gender end up finding so-called female and male behaviors and characteristics precisely because the scientists conducting these experiments assumed that there are only two sexes.<sup>22</sup> Fausto-Sterling repeatedly shows that there is great variation in sex and gender, and her analysis demonstrates that parenting and environment can influence the supposedly purely biological markers for sex. The fluidity of sex and gender leads her to use the term multidimensional. She writes, “But masculine and feminine, cannot be parsed as some kind of continuum. Rather sex and gender are best conceptualized as points in a multidimensional space.... What has become increasingly clear is that one can find levels of masculinity and femininity in almost every possible permutation.”<sup>23</sup> So when “Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action” uses the language that sex and gender are multidimensional, this is guided by significant scientific findings and academic research. Once again, it is evident that the ELCA's greater openness to individuals who claim a wider variety of sex and gender identities is grounded in solid theological reflection and scientific discoveries.

21. Ibid., 32.

22. Ann Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

23. Anne Fausto-Sterling, “The Five Sexes Revisited,” *The Sciences* 40, no 4 (Jul/Aug 2000): 22.

20. “Faith, Sexism, and Justice,” 77–78.

When the ELCA affirms a variety of multidimensional sex and gender identities, it practices neighbor justice. One of the first steps in being neighbor to one another is to see a person as they wish to be seen and to recognize them as created in God's image. Seeking justice for the neighbor also involves advocating for equity in their life and work. Recognizing the complexity of sex and gender identities is also an expression of the social statement's commitment that God's creation is good and diverse. And once again, the Scripture's promise that all Christians are equal members of the body of Christ empowers ELCA Lutherans to welcome and celebrate individuals whose embodied experiences and sex and gender identities reflect the multidimensional diversity of God's good creation.

### Concluding thoughts

In Presiding Bishop Eaton's closing sermon, she preached that the Holy Spirit was present and active in the work of the assembly. She said that the ELCA was now offering a vision of neighbor justice that is in tension with the world's definition of neighbor and of justice. Her words remind all members of the ELCA that Christians should offer a vision or foretaste of God's diverse and equitable reign in their day-to-day lives and in the social teachings of their churches. And, as Bishop Eaton said, the vision offered by a Spirit-filled church is very different from the dominant culture's understanding of how a society should look or function. The kingdom of God that Jesus preached and lived out was very different from the world envisioned by the Roman colonizers.

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Similarly, the expansive views of sex, gender, sexuality, and identity woven throughout "Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action" are very different from those held by many other Christians and religious institutions today.

This is a time for Lutherans to be bold! As Bishop Eaton said, this is a time for members of the ELCA to celebrate the diversity of their communion, the reach of their welcome, and the neighbor-centeredness of their social teachings which spring from the witness of Scripture (diverse creation, justice, and the body of Christ) and resonate with the core insights of the Lutheran tradition (naming sin, caring for neighbor, and employing science to understand creation). ELCA members can proudly claim the social statement as a solidly Lutheran document, and they should boldly live out its call to transformative neighbor justice for the sake of all members of the body of Christ in the church and in the world.