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# Identifying the Intersections: Youth Ministry and the ELCA's Social Statement 'Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action'

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Sheltered from the oppressive heat of Houston in July, high-school youth who descended on the city for the 2018 ELCA Youth Gathering at the NRG Center congregated in front of six-foot tall placards of the ELCA's draft social statement, "Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action." Folks were invited to press their fingers into ink pads and leave their fingerprints next to lines and sections of the statement that grabbed their attention. Youth from across the country diligently read and discussed the ways they had experienced the pain of sexism in their own lives.

As I watched these young people, especially young women, nod emphatically and call their friends over to read the powerful lines they had discovered, I wondered how best to continue this conversation in our congregations. When I first began my career working with youth in churches, I was totally unprepared for the kinds of questions that came up. The first time a young woman spoke to me about her experience of being harassed at school, I struggled to find the words to say and the appropriate action to take. So many of our youth ministers are not ready for those encounters. Furthermore, even when I felt confident speaking to young members about their most pressing questions, I didn't often feel like I had the theological footing I would have liked to address the issues through our shared lens of faith.

"Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action" offers youth ministers and the young people they work with a theological and practical resource for asking these important questions, and permission to bring forward those questions that may have seemed out of place or even taboo in many of our youth groups, but are vital for considering what it means to be a Christian in the public sphere.

Those of us who work in youth ministry have been empowered to help our young people discern vocation in their own lives and to speak to the new life we have in Christ and all the particularities of a life of discipleship. That means we must be ready and willing to address questions related to sex and sexuality, sexism and the impact it has on each of us from birth, and the complexity of human identity.

Each of us, regardless of sex, experiences the destructive power of these sins, but women and girls bear the brunt of patriarchal oppression. The young women in our churches are experiencing acutely the reality that "they have often been restricted in realizing

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abundant life on the basis of sex (biological) and gender,"<sup>1</sup> and they are wondering what their faith community has to say about it. Messages from the media, peers, and even parents communicate to young women that there are really limited ways for them to show up in the world. Young folks in my congregation often speak to me about the viciousness they encounter on social media and the constant pressure to meet some kind of ideal image whose metrics keep shifting.

Messages about "perfection" and social and gender roles, and the oft-accompanying harassment, confront women and girls from childhood, and as the church we have a responsibility to speak to this with integrity and moral imagination. But more than just speaking *to* it, we need to speak *with* our youth about the ways in which people of faith can "...transform attitudes, beliefs, laws, policies, and practices so that all people of all sexes and genders enjoy God's vision of abundant life."<sup>2</sup> Can we break out of the same old patterns of religious education and accompany our

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1. "Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action" (2019), Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 4. (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).

2. *Ibid.*, 50.

young people as they discern their own identity as Christians? Can we look them in the eyes and tell them that the harassment they experience, the messages they receive about sex and gender, femininity and masculinity, bodies and gender roles run counter to the freedom we have been granted in Christ?

A truly relational youth ministry will provide space for these very questions, transforming the youth minister or volunteer from educator to accompanier and exploring the life of faith together. In this kind of relationship, we can listen to the important questions that arise, to the joys and suffering that our high school youth are encountering, and share our own experiences in solidarity. "Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action" can offer a helpful guide and framework for saying definitively to our youth that each and every one of them is fearfully and wonderfully made in the image of God, and for developing those authentic relationships that have a real impact on the lives of our young people.

### Building shared language

I have found that building a shared language with the youth I work with around the variety of ways we each show up in the world, as creations in the image of God, has been a particularly powerful entry point into the kinds of deeper relationship we are looking for. In "Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action," the use of intersectionality as a lens for understanding the complexity of our experience of oppression gives youth ministers a strong base from which to develop this shared lexicon.

The social statement defines intersectionality as "...the ways in which various forms of discrimination and oppression, linked to aspects of a person's identity, overlap."<sup>3</sup> Each of our youth experience sexism in different ways, based on their identities. A young white woman has a different experience of this evil than a young woman of color. And a young LGBTQ man will experience sexism differently than a heterosexual man. As our intersecting identities overlap, the impact of oppression intensifies. This complexity has often been absent from our conversations with youth about what it means to be a Christian in public, to see Jesus in our neighbor, and to live our lives rooted in the freedom we have in Christ.

Our high schoolers understand that they are not one thing, despite the predilection we have to lump them all together into reductionist caricatures. They are keenly aware of the ways in which they experience the evils of sexism and how those experiences vary in community. And they are struck by the continued resistance in the church to truly welcome their whole selves as Beloved. The youth I am lucky enough to work with have a much deeper understanding of sexuality and identity than I ever did in my teens, and are far more comfortable speaking about their own experiences with sexism, harassment, and injustice than I or my peers ever were. I think this is true across our churches, which means that we had better be prepared to get an education from our youth and set aside any assumptions we might have about who the "expert" is.

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### Talking intersectionality

One of the tools I have begun to use in tandem with "Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action" is called "Regenerations: Leadership Pipeline Toolkit," a youth-organizing curriculum developed by the Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing. This organization seeks to develop young people as leaders, organizers, and agents of social change. Their work focuses on learning, leadership development, grant-making, and capacity-building among youth leaders.

One element of the toolkit leads participants through a process of identifying the various roles they play in their lives and the communities to which they belong in order to help understand intersectionality in their lives. This process seems to me a perfect pairing with "Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action" and certainly has helped us to enter into some deeper conversations about sexism and faith.

This activity calls for us to think about our roles and communities as petals on a flower. In my youth group this past fall we each took a blank piece of paper and drew one of those classic daisy-type flowers with a large circle in the center. We wrote our names in the center of the flower and then began to identify the different roles we play in our lives, one role for each petal. We each talked briefly about what these roles mean to us. Responses included words like young, female, male, athlete, white, black, only child, immigrant, poor, sister, and many, many more. Then we discussed the concept of intersectionality using "Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action," recounting again the many ways that the sins of sexism and patriarchy impact each of us differently, and the historical reality that "[t]he personal experiences of women and girls are connected with larger social, institutional, and religious forces."<sup>4</sup>

For the young people in my group, the sting of sexism and patriarchy was felt most acutely in the ways people spoke to them about their bodies—things like dress code double standards in school, the shame that young women were made to feel about feminine hygiene, and sexual harassment. The social statement discusses the ways that healthcare systems and the media operate

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3. Ibid., 25.

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4. Ibid., 27.

"...as if women do not know their own bodies or as if their bodies are not their own."<sup>5</sup> For the young women in the group this resonated deeply.

Sarah<sup>6</sup>, age 13, mentioned that as a young woman, people speak to her with an assumption that one day she will be a mother. "I find myself having to correct people when they say, 'When you're a mom...' by saying 'If...I don't know if I'll have kids!'"

Malia, age 15, commented on the ways that sexism and racism intersect. "[Sexism] has definitely impacted me, not just because of my gender, but because of my skin color," she said. "My mom is always saying, 'Remember you are a girl and you're a person of color, and people are going to look at you.' There are times I'll be walking down the street and someone will be like, 'Hey do you want to get in the car with me?' Like that doesn't happen to men a lot." Sarah nodded her head in agreement and talked about how even her short walk from home can sometimes make her anxious, knowing that she must be aware of her surroundings. Malia continued, "I remember talking about cat-calling one time in a pretty diverse group, but when we went around the circle and asked who had been cat-called, it was more people of color than people who were white. I feel like it happens more to people of color."

Through this process of highlighting our variety of experiences and discussing the impacts of sexism on our intersecting roles, we began to understand the ways in which we each uniquely encounter the oppressive forces of racism, classism, and sexism. We began to see the systemic nature of these forces, which the social statement identifies as "...rooted in a pattern of power, privilege, and prejudice, the key elements in any social system of oppression."<sup>7</sup> We were able to speak to those encounters we have each had with the sins of sexism and patriarchy, not only in school and family but also the church. The youth in my context were well aware of the uniqueness and beauty of belonging to a church that ordains women, yet saying that "You can still see that in a lot of Lutheran churches...women aren't pastors" and "Sometimes when people claim to be Christian, and then they're really racist or sexist, I think 'How can you claim to be Christian when that's so blatantly against what we believe?'"

For the youth minister, the answers to the question of intersectionality are always rooted in the truth that we each have been created in the image of God. "We believe all people are created equally in the image of God...The point of the creation story in Genesis 1 is that all humankind is created at the same time and with the same value, in the image of God."<sup>8</sup> This doesn't mean that human beings are *generally* created in the image of God, but that we are *particularly* created in the image of God. This is a message that our youth are desperate to hear from the church—that their full, complex, and beautiful selves are created in the image of God and treasured by their community.

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5. Ibid., 29.

6. Not her real name. All names have been changed to protect privacy.

7. Ibid., 31.

8. Ibid., 16.

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Wrestling with the complexity of identity also helped some of our youth confront and celebrate the power they have to change the world. "I mean, we hear all the time 'this generation is so lazy' but I mean, organizing a climate change march seems pretty big to me," said Sarah, referencing Greta Thunberg and the Youth Climate Strike. In a culture and a church that often tokenizes or ignores our youth, being able to speak to the powerful and diverse gifts that they bring to the fight for social change can inspire and mobilize young people to lead in the church and the world.

### Intersectionality and scripture

As we move forward in our work together as a youth group, we will continue to refer to the social statement's definition of intersectionality and will ask those broad systemic questions not only about our own experience but also about the stories we encounter in scripture. What does Ruth face as a widow *and* a Moabite? What are the power dynamics at play between Jesus and the Canaanite woman? What are the factors that built a false narrative about Mary Magdalene? Where do we find ourselves identifying with these characters?

Additionally, "Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action" helps youth ministers set the frame for wrestling with those stories that hurt—the stories that seem to celebrate patriarchy or fail to center (or even acknowledge) the voices of women and girls. "Although the Scriptures sometimes reflect patriarchal structures and values, this does not mean that God has prescribed patriarchal structures and values."<sup>9</sup>

Our youth are particularly skilled at naming those stories and conversations within scripture that seem incongruous with our stated values, and the social statement's recommitment to reading scripture as an active Word can challenge our youth to press beyond literal or face-value readings to a more complex engagement with the Word of God.

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9. Ibid., 42.

## A world without sexism

"Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action" has a word for our young people who are learning what it means to be a Christian in public in this historical moment. If we as a church are truly committed to accompaniment with our youth, we must be able to speak to them as full and complex people rather than in generational generalities that, more often than not, are false on their face. Young people—young women and girls in particular—are encountering the violence of sexism and patriarchy and they are uncertain about where and how they can address it. They are uncertain about what the church has to say about who they are and how the Christian community responds to these sins.

By exploring the fullness of our intersecting identities together and noting the variety of ways that the sins of sexism and patriarchy are impacting one another, we can invite youth into deep and meaningful relationships that can change the world. We can invite them into scripture with a lens toward identifying operative systems of power and identifying with the complexity of the stories' characters. We can empower empathetic disciples who meet one another in the world as they are and who affirm in one another the image of the loving and mysterious God. "Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action" can also help us to frame the very ways in which we gather. Are we gathering around the principles of sufficiency, sustainability, solidarity, and participation?<sup>10</sup> Are we considering the ways in which our shared experiences strike one another uniquely? Is our service work advancing God's intention that "...all people have life abundantly and flourish"?<sup>11</sup>

As my youth group wrapped up their time together this fall, we wondered aloud, "What would a world without sexism look like?" Some mused about how much farther along we could have been socially and technologically if voices that have been historically excluded had been included from the beginning. There were comments about greater feelings of safety, confidence, and worth. But the theme that continued to emerge was a vision of a world united in one body, mirroring Paul's imagery in Galatians: "...all are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28). "Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action" is a great tool to help us invite our youth into that vision and into the life of discipleship that strives to realize it. My hope is that we as a church take its charge seriously, and use it to deepen our commitment to justice that looks like Christ.

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10. Ibid., 7.

11. Ibid., 2.