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# Implementing Social Change to Confront Sexism in the Church

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When I was 9 years old, I wrote a letter to my godmother, a Lutheran missionary serving overseas, and told her that I wanted to be a pastor when I grew up. A few weeks later, I received a letter back from her, telling me that girls can't be pastors and I should think of a different way to share God's love when I grew up. While hurt, I began to think about all the pastors I knew (my family was surrounded by pastors as family and friends) and realized I didn't know a single woman pastor. I determined that my godmother must have been correct, that women simply were not pastors, and began to think about other ways I could serve God.

It wasn't until I was 17 and visiting my godmother overseas that she acknowledged the sexism of her claim and apologized. By this time, I had met a few women pastors, but had done some holy discernment that helped eventually direct me to my true vocation as a rostered deacon and community organizer, called to help challenge and change systems that limited access to God's loving abundance and community.

While grateful for the discernment that came out of this experience, and appreciative of my godmother's apology and naming of her participation in the continuation of a sexist system, it's imperative to acknowledge that sexism is a pervasive reality that has seeped into our global and local contexts spanning all aspects of community—including in our schools, neighborhoods, businesses, and churches, without abandon, and often without even being noticed. Implementing changes to confront any ism that is often invisible to the naked eye takes courage, persistence, and intention. Noting, naming, and apologizing for our perpetuation of sexism, intended or not, is just one step toward implementing social change. As church, we are called to do more than apologize. Our baptismal covenants require us to proclaim the good news of God in Christ in word and deed and seek justice and peace in all the earth.<sup>1</sup> This clearly directs us as a church to action that confronts sexism.

It's possible, and perhaps a given, that when engaging in challenge of such traditional systems as patriarchy and sexism, one will experience resistance from people. A familiar refrain in resistance is "Why is this a theological issue that the church needs to engage? This content is too political—you can't tell

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me how to think!" While the church strives to remain separate from partisanship, it's imperative that the church recognize the inherently political nature of the gospel. Anti-patriarchy and anti-sexism span political persuasion. When called by the Scriptures to love one another as God loves us, feed the hungry, free the oppressed, and care for orphans and widows, that includes participation in system-changing action. Sometimes that looks like the church is playing politics, but it's not partisan to want food for the hungry and justice for the oppressed. It's actually what we are called as church to be—political in the sense that we are system-changing, world justice seeking folk.<sup>2</sup> And often, as Lutherans are good at leaning into paradox, it takes getting comfortable with being uncomfortable, when it comes to issues of culture changing and rehumanizing of othered peoples.

## What congregations can do

The "Faith, Sexism, and Justice" social statement of the ELCA is a document worth reading and studying as a congregation. It includes an affirming, challenging, and extensive collection of suggested actions that the church and society might engage in the fight against patriarchy and sexism. While varying contexts and communities might have ways they are involved in the work already, below you will find a few tangible examples or strategies to get your congregation or ministry more rooted in the work of

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1. *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 236.

2. The word "folk" is an intentional spelling intended to challenge binary understandings of gender.

connecting faith to the work of dismantling sexism.

Abba, Imma, Creator in heaven,  
Hallowed be your name.

As church, one simple and noticeable change we can make is to be intentional in using inclusive and expansive (other than human) language for God. One example of this might be to comb through the spoken liturgy chosen for regular worship. It's very simple to edit references to God as "he" or "him" and either rotate between "she" and "he" language or change all gendered references to "God." It's ok, good even, to change gendered references when sharing scripture or liturgy as a tangible way to share God's expansiveness with one another and our congregations: for example, change Father imagery of God to Mother, Parent, or Creator!

Expanding language for God to include the rootedness of a forest, the connectedness of a hive, the shelter of a burrow expands our imagination of the kind of yearning God shows us to have for relationship with humans. A number of congregations have begun to invite the gathered to recite the Lord's Prayer in whatever way or language feels best in their heart, allowing the varied voices to connect in a cacophony of shared prayer instead of the unified single voice naming God our Father. What a gift to our communities to hear shared story and prayer through varied lenses of heart language! Our mother, Our creator, Abba-Imma, Our Maker, Holy One in heaven—hallowed be ALL your names!

Many worshipping communities use music that has a high amount of gendered language for God. Try changing the PowerPoint or bulletin lyrics to read all feminine language or gender inclusive language when referring to God for a season and engage in community dialogue about how that feels. Why is it that we so often feel upset by the change of something known, when really, one of God's most effective ways to show us Godself is by startling us?! Lean in!

Another call from the social statement suggests that we develop and promote the participation of men in more varied roles, including those traditionally seen as women's work. While many church communities are striving to include women in leadership equitable to men in leadership, this strains access for non-gender specific folk in our communities, as well as appearing restrictive to male identifying individuals called to participation in non-stereotypical masculine ways. Perhaps beginning a stay-at-home dads or parent group instead of a "moms" group might be a need in your particular neighborhood. Or intentionally changing the focus of your Christmas cookie exchange to be a Christmas makers exchange that highlights the giftedness of sharing skill and craft. Think about the timing of the stereotypically gendered events your congregation hosts. Are your "women's Bible studies" all during the workday? Are your "men's groups" all on Saturdays at 7 a.m.? Think intentionally through the ways these groups are additionally exclusive. Breaking down the barriers of scheduling might also break down the notion that only some people—and

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certain genders—are welcome.

A further call from the social statement to the church is to advocate for and support the eradication of gender-based violence within the church and society. One way to live into this call is to host a bystander or upstander training in your church for the surrounding neighborhood. These trainings encourage and teach folk how to speak up and engage safely when noticing gender-based, racial, or other forms of discrimination. Additionally the Lutheran ministry ReconcilingWorks facilitates Building an Inclusive Church (BIC) and Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Gender Expression (SOGI) trainings all across the nation for congregations, ministries, and neighborhoods that are yearning for education on how to be inclusive and intentional in the work to dismantle sexism.

Here are a few more possibilities to help jump-start your congregation's partnership in eradicating sex- and gender-based bias:

- Many congregations host Boy Scout troop meetings in their buildings. What about expanding to include hosting Girl Scout troops, Girls on the Run, or other organizations specializing in femme-empowerment for our youngest community members. Think about intentionally hosting a Boy or Girl Scout troop that now includes all genders.
- Seek and encourage opportunities to participate in joint action on issues of patriarchy and sexism beyond your congregation. Send a coalition to your local womxn's marches.<sup>3</sup> Have a regular Womxn's Sunday that fills all places of worship leadership with femme-identifying congregants of all ages. Break up traditional children's Christmas pageant roles by casting a boy as Mary, all female shepherds, a host of boy angels—the sky's the limit!
- Encourage boys and men to participate in all family roles associated with the home by providing cooking or homemaking classes after school or on weekends that teach skills to help foster participation. Do the same with other traditionally gendered roles—offer a variety of basic opportunities for leaders in your community to share their

3. The word "womxn" is an intentional spelling intended to challenge binary understandings of gender.

skills and crafts with classes in basic electrical care, plumbing, how to change your furnace's air filter, how to roast a chicken, how to prune a tree, etc. Break down stereotypes by teaching and training across genders!

- Host a regular community movie night or music swap that begins with dialogue about objectivity and stereotypes while watching or listening to film and song that shows varied human characteristics and roles. Help congregants and neighbors break down what's happening in lyrics or being portrayed on the screen. Below are some examples of where to start:
  - The Highwomen is a country supergroup that sings about gendered stereotypes against womxn. They wrote the first gay country love song in 2019.
  - The film "Tall Girl" on Netflix portrays the story of a high school girl over 6 feet tall and the stereotypes that plague her and challenge her to be herself.
  - Lizzo is a musician whose femme- and fat-empowering lyrics help shape a new narrative of self-worth for different bodies. (Be aware that some song lyrics include graphic language.)
- Read through your Sunday school curriculum intentionally looking for ways sexist stereotypes are perpetuated. Is God only referred to as "he"? Are the stories and images inclusive of non-stereotypically gendered behavior? Encourage your volunteers and teachers to adapt their materials to be intentionally anti-sexist and inclusive. Teach them that they are allowed to tell children and youth that the church has failed in offering teachings that are anti-sexist and -patriarchal and be honest with them about what needs to change.

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Most significantly, it's long work that can't be done overnight. As leaders and communities of congregations and ministries lean into what it takes to partner with justice-seeking anti-sexist movements, it's important to note that not all contexts can do all the work, nor can they do it alone. The gospel mandates that humanity work together, that communities strive to engage in the fullest ways possible, knowing that some can do this work, and others do different work. The gift of being part of the body of Christ is that there are many parts called to different vocations, but we can all work together to offer an alternative and counter-cultural movement to sexism and injustice. While one congregation might offer upstander trainings, and another might create anti-sexist Sunday school curriculum, still another might van-share to a local Womxn's March or offer community movie viewing and discussion evenings. There is nothing too small to be done in the call to dismantle sexism. With grace, gratitude, and hope, may our shared baptismal directives be a gift to our communities, neighborhoods, and the world, as we seek justice and share the gospel of Jesus Christ, the one sent to make all things right.