
What Difference Does It Make?

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Every couple of years, a thousand ELCA Lutherans gather to debate a social statement. There are passionate arguments on the importance of the issue and on whether it should be a social statement or a social message. If the assembly decides to proceed with a new social statement, a whole process begins—funding, recruiting diverse task force members, setting up meetings, bringing in experts, drafting, reviewing, re-drafting, and presenting the final product to the assembly years later. The assembly goes through the process of debating and voting. And then, we have a new social statement in the ELCA.

What difference does it make? Some social statements get more attention than others. For instance, the 2009 statement on human sexuality generated a lot more attention than the 2007 statement on education or the 2011 statement on genetics. As a bishop from 2007-2019, I set up hearings on each of the social statements being considered during my tenure, met with congregations who were excited or troubled, strove to calm fears and engage genuine conversation about the issues and the process. And when the furor (if any) died down, the question remained: What difference does it make?

As a child in church, I listened to the low rumble of voices during the prayers and the creed. And I wondered why there weren't more high, piping voices like my sister's and mine. Even at that early age I was listening for God in the treble clef. I don't think that I was alone. Later I learned that everyone is created in God's image—even if most portrayals of the divine were still of an old and bearded white man in the sky. And I learned that even though we said "all men," we really were talking about all people. We just didn't say it. What difference does it make?

Things that go without saying, often go unsaid. "Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action" puts into words things that have been unsaid for generations, millennia. And we are better off as a church because of it—because we have finally committed ourselves as a church to putting into words a solemn commitment to address sexism in church and society, not as a special interest, but as the core of our being.

It's not that the church hasn't dealt with "women's issues" before. Our predecessor church bodies had women's organizations who were instrumental in bringing about women's ordination. And they had special task forces on women in church and society. An independent Lutheran Women's Caucus (LWC) advocated for justice from the margins of the churches. LWC went dormant as

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a pan-Lutheran organization when the ELCA was formed, under the mistaken assumption that full inclusivity was imminent. In the beginning, the ELCA had both a Commission for Women (now dissolved, with a staff of more than half a dozen replaced by a staff of one), and Women of the ELCA, now officially a "separately incorporated ministry."

Many, if not all, of the church's social statements over the years have dealt with what might be considered "women's issues." Abortion, education, genetics, racism, economic justice—to name a few—have significant impact on women's lives. Social messages, too, address issues that women face: gender-based violence, human rights and others. I see these efforts, while effective in their own right, as band-aids on the real issue of sexism. And in 2009, amidst the turmoil of other historic actions (including adopting a social statement on human sexuality and lifting the barriers for people in "publicly accountable lifelong monogamous same-gender" relationships), the church finally committed itself to a social statement on justice for women.

It took 19 years from the beginning of the ELCA to the vote to initiate a social statement on women and justice. And it took another ten years for that statement to be presented to the assembly for approval—longer than any previous social statement. (In my more cynical moments I could be heard to sigh, "Justice for women, delayed again.") It is part of a long pattern when it comes to issues involving women's rights.

The push for women's suffrage in the U.S. began in the nineteenth century. Susan B. Anthony, Sojourner Truth, Harriet Forten Purvis and many other raised their voices and created a movement.

Many in the movement were also involved in abolition. Because the issue of slavery was front and center in the Civil War, the push for the abolition of slavery took precedence. The 13th, 14th and 15th amendments to the Constitution passed in 1865, 1868 and 1870 (abolition of slavery, guarantee of citizenship, right to vote regardless of race.) It wasn't until 1920 that the 19th amendment was passed, allowing women to vote.

We know from history that women's issues are often delayed or sidelined, even by their advocates, to allow other issues to be addressed first. Excuses range from outright hostility, to "All in good time," to "It's already being covered in other ways. Why do we need a separate law/amendment/statement?" In 1923, Alice Paul first proposed the Equal Rights Amendment, guaranteeing equality under the law regardless of sex. In 1972, Congress passed the ERA and sent it to the states to ratify. In 1982, having fallen short of the required number of states, the ERA failed. What difference does it make? Some argue that most of what the ERA would have accomplished has been addressed in statutes. But the United States of America, a country where a woman won the popular vote for President, still does not have the equal treatment of women and men in the Constitution. That's the difference it makes.

What difference does the ELCA social statement make? Some would argue that many of the issues women face are addressed in other ways in our church—in the social statements and messages, in our advocacy efforts, in the increasing number of women in leadership (not least a presiding bishop who is a woman.) But the absence of a social statement such as the one we adopted leaves women in the church vulnerable. Things that go without saying are often unsaid. That's the difference the social statement makes.

Every social statement has "implementing resolutions". These resolutions are our church's commitment to go beyond passing a statement and resting on our laurels. They are, in some ways, the teeth of the project—what we really think we can do. And they are telling. There are 18 implementing resolutions. They use five verbs: "call on" (9 times); "urge" (3 times); "encourage" (3 times); "direct" (2 times); "recognize" (1 time.) There are only two resolutions that "direct," that really have any force. One (implementing resolution #9) directs the Mission Advancement unit to create a single page of resources online. And the other (implementing resolution #17) directs the Church Council to establish a public repentance and churchwide day of confession. The only directives are a page of resources and a church council-engineered day of repentance. It is worth noting that the public ceremony of repentance and reconciliation with indigenous people regarding the Doctrine of Discovery, passed overwhelmingly in 2016, has still not taken place.

The other sixteen implementing resolutions are essentially voluntary. Whether it is using gender-inclusive language, mandating anti-sexism training, doing public advocacy consistent with the statement, the resolutions express hope, but do not mandate. They cannot. That's not how our polity works. But the statement has power in how we claim it, how we make it ours.

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I can remember the early years of women's ordination when we wondered if we would be sacrificed to advance ecumenical agendas with Roman Catholics, the Orthodox, and the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. Of course that did not happen. But there were no guarantees. That's the difference the statement makes. And yes, there have been ecumenical issues. When Bishop April Larson visited the Vatican with an official ELCA delegation in 1998, she was told she could not participate in the audience with the Pope. So the rest of the delegation sat outside with her in solidarity. In 2010, Bishop Claire Burkat, in a similar delegation, was invited into the audience, as long as no photos were taken. In 2012, as Chair of the ELCA Conference of Bishops, I was welcomed to the public audience with the Pope, and the cameras went wild.

What difference does it make? I am not naive enough to believe that the passage of this social statement will eliminate the toxic consequences of sexism from church and society. But it matters because it is our church committing itself to actually saying that sexism and its consequences are unacceptable. So when a woman comes to a pastor to reveal that she is being abused at home, it makes a difference. We categorically reject that kind of behavior. When a woman is sexually harassed in the workplace, it makes a difference. That is not acceptable.

When teenagers on a church youth retreat bully a teen who is gender non-conforming, it makes a difference. As a church we have said that we will not tolerate that kind of treatment. When a boy wants to learn to knit rather than do woodworking, it makes a difference. We have said, as a church, that we will strive to move beyond old gender stereotypes.

When a congregation is in a search process, it makes a difference. As a church we have said that we will not accept sexism as a criterion in calling a pastor or electing a bishop. We

have said that it is not acceptable that women wait longer for calls, are paid less than men, are less likely to be senior pastors, and are disproportionately more likely to serve part-time calls. It makes a difference.

Issues of justice are not limited to the church. The social statement challenges Lutherans to call out injustices in the public sphere, as well, and to work diligently to create a more just society for women and men (and everybody in-between.) Historically some Lutherans have been hesitant to engage in the public sphere, but this statement makes a difference. Churches partner with domestic violence shelters as a response to God's call to love the neighbor and to care for those in need. The statement makes a difference because it challenges many of the myths of patriarchy that justify sexism. The statement matters because it is our church's declaration that patriarchy is no more acceptable in society than it is in the church and that we as Christians can do something about it.

So what difference does it make? It makes a difference because it is now part of what defines us as the ELCA. The statement challenges and empowers every woman, man and child in the ELCA to implement the repudiation of sexism and patriarchy in their own lives, in both church and society. What can we do? First, read the statement. (Begin with the condensed version, and the resolutions.) Second, pray. Pray for those who are affected by sexism, misogyny, and gender-based violence. Pray for understanding. Pray for change. Include in public prayers issues that have previously been unspoken: gender-based violence, homophobia, stereotypes, domestic abuse, trans-phobia. If you are a pastor, listen to people's stories. Listen to pain from those who see themselves hurt by sexism and to pain from those who don't understand what the fuss is all about.

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Do an inventory of women and men in your congregation: who does what. Are women and men equally called on to lead? Are men and women encouraged to share their gifts, regardless of gender? Are girls and boys equally represented as acolytes, nursery attendants, council representatives? Has the congregation produced both male and female candidates for the ministry? As lay leaders? Who is on the altar guild?

Take a step into the community. Volunteer at a rape crisis center, an LGBTQIA center, a domestic violence shelter, and do it because your faith calls you to. Go to the web page mandated in the implementing resolutions and use the resources. Listen when a woman tells you about sexism. Believe her. What difference does it make? It empowers and challenges us to reflect, pray, and act. Women's concerns have moved from the periphery to the center, and we are all better for it. That's the difference it makes.