



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

A social statement on...

Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action

Article-Only Version

This social statement was amended and then adopted by a more than two-thirds vote (863-26) at the fifteenth Churchwide Assembly on August 9, 2019, at Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

This social statement comes in two versions. The short version (contained here) conveys the statement's essence in 40 articles, containing the entire scope of convictions and commitments. The full version consists of those same 40 articles, along with a preface, a conclusion, and an explanation for each article, allowing readers to go deeper into an article's meaning. The full version also contains a glossary and Implementing Resolutions.

These two formats serve different needs. Both were crafted in the hope that the Holy Spirit will move readers into fruitful understanding, commitment, and action. The full version and additional supplemental resources are available on the statement's web page, ELCA.org/socialstatements.

Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action

Short Statement

I. Fundamental Teaching: God desires abundant life for all.

- 1) We of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America believe God's intention revealed through the Scriptures is that all people have life abundantly and flourish.
- 2) We believe all people are created equally in the image of God. Every individual is dependent upon God, and all share in the God-given vocation to contribute their gifts to help all of creation flourish. Being in the image of the triune God means that we humans are relational, that we are interconnected. Just as we interact with God, we are social creatures relating with each other and all of creation.
- 3) Despite God's intention for creation, humans exist in a state of sin. Because we fail to trust God as we should, we are alienated from God, from other people, and from creation itself. Not only individually, but also collectively, we live out this alienation through disobedience to God, pride, complacency, self-abasement, and acts against others, all of which limit the abundant life God intends.
- 4) We believe that we are healed and redeemed from this alienation. That is, Lutherans confess that we are justified by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ, no matter what we have done or left undone. This promise means we are freed from bondage to the people and things we trust and love more than God or the ways we try to justify ourselves, sometimes at the expense of others. God's grace frees us and empowers us to love others as God loves all of creation.
- 5) Our focus as Lutheran Christians on Jesus Christ affects how this church understands the call to do justice. 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.

6) This focus on Jesus Christ also affects how we understand the Scriptures. While the Scriptures speak both Law and Gospel, Martin Luther emphasized that the Scriptures should be read by paying attention to what proclaims Christ—what carries the Gospel message of God’s grace and mercy to all people.

7) As Lutheran Christians, we recognize human reason and knowledge as gifts from God to be used for the common good. While the scriptural call to neighbor justice is clear, human reason and knowledge are essential to discern the specific forms, policies, and structures that best enable us to enact justice in particular contexts. Recognizing that the gifts of reason and knowledge are given to people of all religions and worldviews, Christians are freed to work together with them for the common good.

8) We believe that the church is called to live as the body of Christ in the world even while we struggle with the realities of sin. As Lutherans, we recognize that acting justly within family, church, and society for the common good is central to the vocation to which God calls all people.

II. Analysis of the Problem: Sin subverts human flourishing in many ways.

9) Though God desires fullness of life and equity for everyone, as a church we recognize that women and girls in particular suffer a range of harm and injustice due to sex (biological), gender, or both. In addition to sex and gender, the experiences of individuals and groups are shaped and complicated by intersecting factors. These include race, ethnicity, national origin, nationality (including American Indian and Alaska Native), religious identity, immigration status, sexuality, marital status, economic means, age, ability, embodied experiences, and education. This reality is known as intersectionality.¹ This statement’s references to women and girls are intended to be inclusive of all people who identify as

women or girls in the diversity of their individual and communal identities and expressions.

10) The experiences of women and girls from a variety of backgrounds, both in the past and in the present moment, reveal that they have often been restricted in realizing abundant life on the basis of sex (biological) or gender.

11) 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.² When power, privilege, and prejudice are associated with sex, gender, and sexuality, sociologists use the terms patriarchy and sexism.³

Patriarchy is a social system dominated by men, identified with men, and centered on men's actions, voices, and authority. Patriarchy does not mean that males are bad and females are good, or that only males support this unfair system. However, in patriarchal systems, men are typically viewed as superior to women, are given more power than women, and have more authority than women. A patriarchal worldview and way of life grants male privilege. Sexism is the reinforcement of male privilege, which leads to discrimination. It promotes the silencing, controlling, and devaluing of women, girls, and people whose gender expression is different from the conventional expressions of masculinity and femininity.

Because people live within social and religious systems, everyone knowingly or unknowingly participates in this patriarchal system. Although patriarchy and sexism affect different people in different ways, as individuals we are socialized to conform to these patterns of power, privilege, and prejudice. This makes us complicit in maintaining social systems of oppression.

12) Although men and boys often benefit from this social system, patriarchal structures and values also harm men and boys, including gay and transgender men. They are harmed when they are pressured to conform to narrow gender stereotypes or are

unable to live out a false ideal of male superiority and control. People of all genders who do not conform to gender-based roles and stereotypes often are not seen or valued; sometimes they are violently oppressed and even killed. Men of all racial and ethnic minorities in North America may experience patriarchy and sexism particularly intertwined with white privilege. The message of white-identified patriarchy and sexism is that men and boys of color are not fully men and boys.

13) Some social and religious beliefs compound patriarchy. Most instances of gender-based harm are connected to commonly held beliefs and customs. For example, ideas that people are created into a hierarchy based on sex—being only male or female—reinforce and sometimes lead to gender-based injustice.

14) The ELCA celebrates that humans are relational beings and that we live in social systems. Positive, equitable social systems can lead to joy and gladness. However, social systems can also have negative consequences.

Even though individuals make choices within social systems, those systems are more powerful than any individual, government, culture, or religious community. Beliefs and customs are reflected in laws, policies, and practices within both secular and religious institutions, which makes them so systemic that they are difficult to identify and dismantle.

This church's commitment to neighbor justice compels us to expose how patriarchy and sexism are woven into individual, social, and religious life, causing harm to all people and even to all of creation.

15) As Christians, we see that patriarchy and sexism prevent all human beings from living into the abundant life for which God created them. 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. We confess that, as God's people forgiven in Jesus Christ, we are simultaneously liberated and sinful. We are broken, yet we are made new by grace through faith. This good news

is true even as we participate in cultures and societies that are broadly patriarchal and sexist.

III. The Christian Tradition: It is both challenge and resource.

16) In faith, this church confesses that Christianity has been complicit in the sin of patriarchy and sexism through certain beliefs, practices, and aspects of its history. At the same time, we believe God provides resources within the Christian faith and the Lutheran tradition to challenge the harmful beliefs and effects of patriarchy and sexism and to bring forth new ways of living.

17) The ELCA teaches that God's Word of Law and Gospel speaks through the Scriptures. We also recognize that there are words and images, social patterns, and moral beliefs in the Scriptures that reflect values rooted in what today we call patriarchy and sexism. Some aspects of the Scriptures reflect the cultures and societies in which they arose. Their continued misuse contributes to maintaining hierarchies and patterns of inequity and harm. A Lutheran reading of the Scriptures through Christ, focused on the devotional, historical, literary, and theological aspects of texts, frees us from the harm of taking all the Scriptures only literally.

18) The Christian theological tradition is full of ideas and teaching that can negatively or positively affect people. In particular, some doctrines affect our understanding of humanity and God more than others. Teachings about the cross and suffering, the image of God, the incarnation, the body of Christ, and the Trinity have sometimes been misused to support patriarchal beliefs, attitudes, church practices, behaviors, and structures. These teachings affect our use of language and our understandings of humanity and Christian ministry. At the same time, these doctrines can be liberating resources for healing the effects of the sins of patriarchy and sexism.

19) The central Lutheran belief that we are justified by grace through faith empowers this church to challenge patriarchy

and sexism, which devalue people according to sinful human standards.

20) The Lutheran understanding of the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion, in which the Word of God is connected with tangible, physical elements, grounds efforts to prevent the harm that sexism and patriarchy cause to the bodies, minds, and spirits of human beings.

21) The ELCA has identified sufficiency, sustainability, solidarity, and participation as the key principles for creating and supporting justice.⁴ This church commends these principles to create and support neighbor justice, specifically gender justice for the neighbor. Social and religious structures and institution—including ideas, beliefs, religious teachings, laws, policies, practices, and language—must be assessed and should be guided by these principles.

22) The ELCA recognizes that some progress has been made to address patriarchy and sexism and to reduce their effects; however, more effort is required. We believe that this church, together with many other partners, can identify and challenge the complexities of patriarchy and sexism and advance equity. Gender-based equity happens through beliefs and ideas that are gender just and through laws, policies, and practices that support an equitable common good—abundant life for all.

IV. Response: The ELCA is called to new commitments and action as a church.

23) Propelled by these theological convictions and the robust resources of the Lutheran heritage, this church responds to God's call to justice with the following commitments to promote and support action toward a more equitable life together in Christ.

24) This church recognizes that the body of Christ is called to honor and support women and girls from a variety of backgrounds, identities, and personal experiences in ways more

consistent with life-giving theology and faith practices. As a church, we commit ourselves to celebrating and affirming the gifts and insights that women and girls bring to every expression and dimension of this church.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America specifically commits to:

25) Promote the practice and use of scriptural translation and interpretation that acknowledge the contexts in which the Scriptures were written and reject the misuse of Scripture that has supported sexist attitudes and patriarchal structures.

26) Promote theological reflection that responds to the gender-based needs of the neighbor. Teachers and theologians need to be honest about how church teachings have been misused to support patriarchy and sexism. More importantly, this church calls upon its teachers and theologians to work toward worthier expressions of the historic faith that honor God's desire for all people to thrive.

27) Use inclusive language (all genders) for humankind and inclusive and expansive language (other than human) for God. This church is committed to the deepest Christian understanding of the Trinity revealed through Jesus Christ and to the importance of imagining and speaking about God in faithful ways that expand rather than limit the expression of God's self-revelation and mystery. In particular, we support developing liturgies, hymns, prayers, and educational materials that broaden use beyond predominantly masculine language. This practice follows the scriptural witness that God transcends human categories. Therefore, as in the Scriptures, metaphors for and images of God should be drawn frequently from the lives of people of all identities and experiences and gleaned from nature in all its diversity. Employing inclusive and expansive language for and images of God helps human beings approach and encounter the God of beauty and love who reveals God's self to humanity in rich and mysterious ways.

28) Develop and support more extensive policies and practices within the ELCA that promote equitable authority and leadership

within this church in all its expressions. In many instances this requires promoting the leadership of women, with special concern for women of color. In other cases, this means promoting the participation of men in more varied roles, including those traditionally seen as “women’s work.”

29) Promote changes that are economically just, including equitable pay and benefits, for women in all ELCA institutions and organizations, with special attention to the situations of people affected by intersecting forms of discrimination.

30) Seek and encourage faithful dialogue, discernment, and, when possible, joint action on issues of patriarchy and sexism with other members of the body of Christ and with partners of other religions and worldviews. As a member of a global communion, the ELCA affirms the Lutheran World Federation’s “Gender Justice Policy.” www.lutheranworld.org/content/women-church-and-society.

V. Response: The ELCA calls for action and new commitments in society.

31) This church teaches that the God who justifies expects all people to seek justice in earthly relationships, structures, and systems. The ELCA calls for sustained and renewed efforts through which women, girls, and gender non-conforming people experience greater equity and justice. The following commitments express this church’s firm hope for renewed social relationships and structures that benefit the common good.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America commits itself to:

32) Advocate for and support laws, policies, and practices that respect diverse bodies rather than discriminating against, objectifying, or devaluing them. Women, girls, and people who identify as non-binary must not be deprived of their human or civil rights. (See the ELCA’s social message “Human Rights,” ELCA.org/socialmessages.)

33) Advocate for and support the eradication of gender-based violence within the church and more broadly in society by addressing both the systemic aspects of such violence and the personal responsibility of those who perpetrate harm. (See the ELCA's social messages "Gender-based Violence" and "Commercial Sexual Exploitation," ELCA.org/socialmessages.)

34) Advocate for and support medical research, health care delivery, and access to equitable and affordable health care services, including reproductive health care, that honor how bodies differ and eliminate discrimination due to sex (biological), gender, or sexual orientation. (See the ELCA social statements "Caring for Health: Our Shared Endeavor" and "Abortion," ELCA.org/socialstatements.)

35) Advocate for and support economic policies, regulations, and practices that enhance equity and equality for women and girls, with special concern for raising up women and girls who experience intersecting forms of oppression. (See the ELCA's social statement "Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All," ELCA.org/socialstatements.)

36) Advocate for and support multifaceted understandings of social and economic roles so that neither our human traits (such as courage or compassion) nor our callings (such as business leader or stay-at-home parent) are dictated by our sex (biological) and gender. Encourage and empower all people to use their gifts for the sake of the common good, whether at home, at work, or in the public sphere.

37) Advocate for and support resources for families of various configurations and the communities in which they live. Empower parents and all who raise or care for children or other family members to nurture, protect, and provide for their households in ways that do not reinforce gender-based stereotypes. In particular, advocate for institutional changes that support and encourage men and boys to participate in all family roles associated with the home, caregiving, parenting, and nurturing.

38) Advocate for and support legal reforms, humane policies, and adequate services for migrants, immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, especially those who experience intersecting forms of oppression. (See the ELCA's social message "Immigration," ELCA.org/socialmessages.)

39) Advocate for and support portrayals in entertainment, media, and advertising that do not objectify or stereotype people but rather show all people as capable of the wide variety of human characteristics and roles.

40) Advocate for and support means for increasing women's participation in local, state, and national politics, with special attention to the proportionate advocacy and support needed by those who face intersecting forms of oppression.

End Notes

1 Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* (1989): 139-167.

2 *Freed in Christ: Race, Ethnicity, and Culture* (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 1995), 4, ELCA.org/socialstatements.

3 See Allan G. Johnson, *The Gender Knot: Unraveling Our Patriarchal Past*, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: University Press, 2014).

4 These principles are evident throughout ELCA social teaching and policy. Examples include the social statements *Caring for Creation; Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All* and *Genetics, Faith and Responsibility*. Visit ELCA.org/socialstatements.

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