BASIC VOCABULARY
FOR
UNDERSTANDING PATRIARCHY AND SEXISM

Call a thing what it is! Martin Luther argued in *The Heidelberg Disputation* that "a theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is." A number of Lutheran theologians turn to his exhortation as one reason that it is important for patriarchy and sexism to be named for what they are. Putting a name to experience is an important step on the way to dismantling the crippling power of all of the systems of oppression, in this case, the social system of patriarchy.

This handout is an invitation into the discipline of naming things for what they actually are in order to foster change. Using the names of things also helps us to let go of denial and resistance when working to end patriarchy and sexism in church and in society.

Please see the variety of other resources available at www.elca.org/justiceforwomen.

VOCABULARY for UNDERSTANDING SEXISM

Patriarchy is a kind of society in which all people, males and females, participate. According to sociologist Allan Johnson, "A society is patriarchal to the degree that it promotes male privilege by being *male dominated*, *male identified*, and *male centered*. It is also organized around an obsession with control and involves as one of its key aspects the oppression of women."[1]

> **Male dominance** refers to the fact that positions of social and religious authority are largely held by men in patriarchy. The result of male dominance is a system of power difference between women and men. (For example, the power difference can be seen in the disparity of national and global wealth and in the legal definition of what constitutes rape.) "Male dominance also promotes the idea that men are superior to women" because humans often conclude that superior people hold positions of power.[2]

> **Male identification** describes the association in patriarchal cultures between what is socially normal, desirable, and good with maleness and masculinity. When men are viewed as the human standard, men are seen as superior. Therefore, what is valued in society is associated more often with men. For example, "good" leadership is culturally associated with men. Powerful female leaders are both exceptions to this norm and vilified, as is transparent in media portrayals of powerful political women.[3]

> **Male centeredness** "means that the focus of attention is primarily on men and what they do."[4] The term *androcentrism* is often used to refer to male centeredness.

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[1] Allan G. Johnson, *The Gender Knot: Unraveling Our Patriarchal Legacy* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005), 5. Italics in original.
[2] Johnson, 6.
[3] See Johnson, 6-9. See also Alice H. Eagly and Linda L. Carli, *Through the Labyrinth: the truth about how women become leaders* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2007).
[4] Johnson, 10.

Sexism refers to that which promotes male privilege.[5] In other words, sexism refers to hierarchically ordered gender stereotyping, in which males are privileged over females. Sexism is expressed on a variety of social and religious levels. Sexism is part of the social system of patriarchy.[6]

Feminism is, simply put, "a framework for analysis."[7] Feminism is a way of thinking, seeing the world, and looking for answers to the problem of patriarchy and its effects. Feminism as a lens of analysis will lead to various particular opinions, but feminism itself should not be confused with the opinions themselves.

Although there is a wide ranging field of diversity in both feminist theory and feminist activism, there are at least two shared core ideas, according to Johnson. These two shared ideas are: 1) that gender inequality is real and 2) that it is a problem.[8] The same can be said for the diversity and core ideas in feminist theologies.

Sex refers to biology.[9]

Gender refers to the social aspects of biology.[10] In other words, gender is a social and theological construction that answers what biology means. These constructed meanings of gender influence individuals, interpersonal relationships, and systems of human relationships, such as, for example universities, governments, or religions.[11]

The United Nations defines gender in similar terms: "Gender refers to socially constructed differences in attributes and opportunities associated with being female or male and to the social interactions and relationships between women and men. Gender determines what is expected, allowed and valued in a woman or a man in a given context. In most societies, there are differences and inequalities between women and men in the roles and responsibilities assigned, activities undertaken, access to and control over resources, as well as in decision-making opportunities."[12]

Gender analysis "is a tool to understand [the] disparities between women and men's realities in any context. It is conscious that the same issue affects men and women differently and disproportionately and challenges the notion that everybody is affected by an issue in the same way regardless of their contexts."[13] Gender analysis is an effort to see how social meanings of gender affect the experiences of women and men and girls and boys across various social and religious contexts.

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[5] Johnson, 17.
[6] Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Sexism," in Letty M. Russell and J. Shannon Clarkson, eds., *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 256-257.
[7] Johnson, 112.
[8] Johnson, 112.
[9] Johnson, 80.
[10] Johnson, 80.
[11] Natalie K. Watson, *Feminist Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 25.
[12] The United Nations report, "The World's Women 2005: Progress in Statistics," Introduction, 1.
[13] "Gender-based analysis: A guide for policy-making," Status of Women in Canada, March 1996.

Privilege is "any unearned advantage that is available to members of a social category while being systematically denied to others."[14]

Power in a system of patriarchy is ultimately defined as control over another or others.[15] According to Johnson, power as control is living the "Great Lie" of disconnection and competition. To give some women this same patriarchal power will not transform social systems and individuals away from sexism, however.[16]

Theologically, we are drawn to understand power differently from the idea that power is control. Rather, God's power, we confess in the Christian creeds and proclaim in the gospel message, is the power to redeem for the sake of the world. According to one South African theologian, "Ideally, power is reciprocal, collaborative energy that engages us personally and communally with God, with one another, and with all of creation in such a way that power becomes synonymous with the vitality of living fully and freely."[17]

Social systems and individuals and the difference between the two must be clearly understood in order to claim responsibility for changing patriarchy and sexism and to work towards transformation.

In contrast with most of human history, the central model of social life for approximately the last 300 years has been *the individual*. (This can be referred to as a Post Enlightenment worldview of the person.) Such a worldview makes us think that bad things like sexism and racism happen because there are bad people who do bad things. Instead, we need to see that we participate in social systems. Each individual must ask: How do I participate in patriarchy? How does my participation in patriarchy connect me to the consequences of it?[18]

The consequences of patriarchy are manifest in social problems. As in many institutions, in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, social problems such as domestic violence, clergy sexual abuse, commercial sexual exploitation, and clergywomen's leadership have been identified as "women's issues" or "justice for women issues." Johnson urges, "We need to see and deal with the social roots that generate and nurture the social problems that are reflected in and manifested through the behavior of individuals."[19] Therefore, alleviating the critical crisis of social problems *alone* will not transform the church and society away from a patriarchal social system and sexism. Rather, the church is called to simultaneously confront the social and theological roots that result in social problems and to alleviate the crisis of the social ills.

Although we each participate in the system of patriarchy because we were born into it, a system is larger than the individuals who participate in it. We therefore need to see how our world works by understanding the relationship between individuals and social systems.[20]

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[14] Johnson, 5.
[15] Johnson, 55-56. See also 8-9 and 41-42.
[16] Johnson, 8.
[17] Denise M. Ackerman, "Power," in Russell & Clarkson, eds., *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, 219-220.
[18] Johnson, 27.
[19] Johnson, 29.
[20] Johnson, 30-31.

The relationship between an individual and a social system can be described by two movements: 1) each of us is shaped by social systems, and 2) we make social systems happen. Johnson observes, "As we participate in social systems, we are shaped by *socialization* and by *paths of least resistance*."[21] The safest response to the ways in which we are socialized is to take on the dominant version of reality and act as if it is the only way to be. In order to save ourselves from social resistance or rejection, we usually simply go along with paths of least resistance.[22]

Although Johnson does not describe the opportunity for social change in theological terms, there is what some would call proleptic[23] promise in the midst of human participation in social systems. What we hope for is available in the present. There are options to the status quo! "Because people make systems happen," Johnson argues, "then people can also make systems happen differently. And when systems happen differently, the consequences are different as well."[24]

In other words, *how* we participate as individuals in social systems matters. Nevertheless, changing patriarchy is not simply a matter of changing individual habits or thoughts because patriarchy is a system that "includes cultural ideas about men and women, the web of relationships that structure social life, and the unequal distribution of power, rewards and resources that underlies privilege and oppression."[25]

Paths of least resistance are the easiest possible or most acceptable avenues of response or action or thought shaped by social systems. We follow them because they seem either obvious or correct. Sometimes the fact that other paths exist is not obvious until someone chooses to subvert the norm and takes an alternate route. The person/s who go outside of the paths of least resistance in order to change the status quo is often the focus of resistance, whether in the form of outright violence or simple social disapproval.[26]

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[21] Johnson, 31.

[22] Johnson, 31-32.

[23] In the field of theology, eschatology refers to "the last things," such as the second coming of Christ, the last judgment, heaven, hell, and the eternal kingdom of God. What God brought to earth in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is a prolepsis of the future kingdom of God. Prolepsis means that what happened in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ was "the end" appearing ahead of time. Through the grace of God, we are called to live proleptically—to live a proleptic ethic. For more on eschatology and prolepsis, see Ted Peters, GOD—The World's Future, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000), 318-321; 372-375.

[24] Johnson, 32.

[25] Johnson, 38. If you like to learn through stories, please see the movies *Focus* and *Enchanted* for examples of individuals choosing to participate in social systems differently. *Focus* is the story of one man's experience of anti-Semitism in the United States and the choices he must make about how to resist paths of least resistance. *Enchanted* is a children's fantasy that offers excellent opportunities for intergenerational groups to discuss social systems and personal power to resist paths of least resistance. In addition, the lead female and male characters disrupt some of the conventional norms of what it means to be a woman or to be a man.

[26] Allan G. Johnson, *Privilege, Power, & Difference* (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2001), 86-89.

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