

Module 1 Workshop Guide

Why do we Need to Talk Together?

Pages 24-35 in Faith, Sexism, Justice: Conversations Toward a Social Statement

<http://www.elca.org/womenandjustice>

Opening Prayer – *See Suggested Prayers by Pastor Connie Winter-Eulberg on the ELCA Sierra Pacific Synod website or see prayers on pages 22-23 of the study guide.*

Opening Prayer:

Spirit of Truth, we call upon you to be present as we begin our conversations about hard issues around women and justice. We know that what is reality in our world is far from what you want for us. Help us to envision a world where women and girls are valued and sheltered from violence and oppression. Help us make your vision of justice a reality. AMEN (Pastor Connie Winter-Eulberg 2017)

Scripture Reading: Luke 4:16-21

When Jesus came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. The Lord has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” And Jesus rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then Jesus began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Moment of silent reflection

I. WHAT BRINGS US HERE? (15 MINUTES)

Opening exercise: *You might want to use a stopwatch!!*

- 1 minute: Invite participants to take a minute to think about or write down their answers to one of these two questions:

- Why do I think we need to talk about the issues of women and justice?
- Why did I come to this session today?
- 3 minutes: Have participants pair up. Each person in the pair takes a moment to share their answer and then to listen carefully to their partner's answer.
- 4 minutes: Each pair then joins another pair and "the listener" introduces to the others what their partner said.
- 3 minutes: Gather everyone back together and ask for a sampling of reasons given for why we need to talk together about women and justice. Only "listeners" report to the group, with permission from their speaker partners, of course. On newsprint or a white board, write a few words to describe each reason given.)

What Brings Us Here?

One fundamental reason for Christians is the belief that God as creator makes all people with dignity, and so our church (the ELCA) is committed to the full and equitable participation of all people in church and society. Yet, for example, women and girls as a group experience tragically high rates of physical and sexual abuse, as well as economic disparities in income and opportunities. Many people point to the personal and systemic sin of SEXISM as what leads to oppression and marginalization.

While there have been significant advancements in the last 100 years within both church and society, we need to talk because many problems remain.

Jesus' announcement in Luke about his purpose, just above, also compels us to talk about all of this, too. He tells his listeners that his mission is to bring good news to the poor, release to captives, sight to the blind and to let the oppressed go free.

What does this mean today regarding women and justice? It is through talking together that the Holy Spirit can help us understand what participation in Jesus' ongoing ministry means for us as individuals and for our families, our work or school situation, our congregation, our synod and for the whole ELCA in fact! In addition, there is a formal reason for this sustained conversation across our church at this particular time.

History of This Social Statement: (You may want to paraphrase this section)

The 2009 ELCA Churchwide Assembly authorized that "the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America develop a social statement on the topic of justice for women in church and society." That assembly – the ELCA's highest legislative body –

received motions from four synods and from other sources calling for the development of a social statement. Those who urged it and those who voted for its development believed the ELCA needed to initiate a broad and sustained conversation that could lead to a statement with official teaching and policy related to sexism.

When adopted, a social statement does not dictate what ELCA members “have to believe” but does present our church’s fullest understanding of Scripture and contemporary knowledge to assist members to reach informed judgments from a faith perspective and to take action.

Since 2012, the ELCA Task Force on Women and Justice: One in Christ has been hard at work. Members of the task force have been present for or received reports from nearly 100 listening events to learn what concerns are on the hearts and minds of members. During nine weekend meetings, the task force also has heard presentations from more than two dozen specialists to help it understand the issues.

(Learn more about the members and the work of the task force at ELCA.org/womenandjustice.)

The conversation within the task force about women and justice in church and society has been lively and has opened up questions, new understanding of needs and new insights. Through this study that begins with this module, the task force is now inviting every member, and others, to participate in conversation and engage the issues.

The task force’s work will result in a proposed social statement to be considered at the 2019 ELCA Churchwide Assembly.

II. HOW SHALL WE TALK TOGETHER? (20 MINUTES)

Conversation in community about social and political issues is not necessarily easy. This is especially the case today since we live in a time of polarization and uncivil discourse. While we may say, “They will know we are Christians by our love,” it can be rough and rewarding, scary and eye-opening – all at the same time – to talk together. That is just a fact when people participate in the process of conversation in a Christian community. Fortunately, there are well-tested ways to create a safe and productive space for talking together.

First and foremost for our conversations, it is important to recognize that our unity in Christ is a gift of God. It is not the result of agreeing about everything we discuss, even deeply held ethical convictions. This gift of unity is not the same thing as uniformity, and it is not our doing; it is given to us in our common baptism into Christ. This gift of unity calls us forward in the Spirit to seek relationships of “mutual conversation and consolation.”¹

Such relationships are essential for any genuine conversation. In conversations in which we try to discern what is good and right (Romans 12:1-2), we depend first upon the church's unity in Christ because we all see through a mirror dimly, and all of us must rely on the Holy Spirit's guidance, which is given within the community.

While depending on that unity, it is clear that lively and constructive conversations require creating safe spaces to talk. Safe conversation requires using good conversation practices, and it requires common commitment to use those. One of the ways to create a safe space is to make a covenant for conversation. The biblical idea of covenant has a much deeper meaning than a "contract."

The Bible shows how God relates to the world through enduring covenantal promises. Human beings can reflect God's way by giving and receiving promises in human associations that recognize the presence of the divine in their midst. In short, being accountable both to one another and to God is what covenants are about. Talking together as Christians about tough social questions, then, goes best when those involved agree to a covenant for conversation.

Covenant Guidelines for Conversation.

See Pages 13-14 for more information and to copy the Covenant Guidelines.

****Note to facilitator** – Please pass out the handout "Covenant Guidelines for Conversations". I read through it quickly with the group and asked if there were any questions or suggestions. We then went on. This seems pretty standard of other groups. I continued to refer to this covenant in the modules especially those about sensitive topics like Violence Against Women and Girls.

Make sure the point is made that these guidelines are necessary for safe and constructive conversations that express God's love for all people. People are asked to make "I" statements and keep confidentiality.

Ritual about the Covenant Guidelines:

Have participants turn to the ritual on the handout. Invite everyone to stand as they are able and read the commitments aloud together. If comfortable in your setting, invite participants to end the ritual by turning to the person next to them and marking their forehead with the sign of the cross.)

III. WHERE SHOULD WE BEGIN? (12 MINUTES)

Our conversation is about making the connections. In some recent movies (for example, "The Hunger Games," "Suffragette," "Selma" or "Spotlight") the people involved come to understand that there is something more than just the choices of

individuals at work causing incidents of suffering. The characters come to recognize the existence of “systems” that run deep and broad. They experience these forces as powerful, enduring and pervasive, greater than any one individual, group, community or even government. They also realize that systems can be changed, even though it is extremely difficult.

Question for sharing: (Feel free to have participants break into groups of 2)

When have you experienced the effect of a “system,” that is, felt the effect of a combination of factors and actors that was bigger than any individual’s action, yet had a very real effect on you?

****The following paragraphs are really helpful. You can paraphrase these as you wish. There is a handout of the diagram that is on page 29.**

As discussed in the question just above, many of us have had such an experience with a system. Most people can identify a time when we experienced troubles that were not caused by a single individual or even group of people, and we felt the power of “the system.” We experienced at least inconvenience, if not outright harm, as a result of the combination of power in individuals’ actions, policies, laws, attitudes and words. The harm or loss was real even if there was no physical attack or single “cause.” Surprisingly, in those cases we even may have been ourselves a participant in this system and yet were still harmed by it!

An essential way to explain the experiences of women and girls in society – though it affects everyone – is by thinking of systems. It is difficult to accurately portray “systemic realities” because they are complicated and dynamic, rather than two dimensional.

Still, it may help to let a graphic illustrate how there are connections. We are troubled when we hear that a woman is raped or a girl struggles with body image. Most of us are dissatisfied when we learn that women, especially women of color, earn less than men for the same work, or that individuals are demeaned by words or actions because of their sex, gender, economic status, skin color or cultural background. These incidents of harm, loss, coercion or cruelty are represented by the curved line near the top. It is fairly easy to think about all of this harm, though, as if it were not connected to the other two lines.

The diagram, (Found in the handout on Module 1) however, shows the connections. Harm is set in motion by the other curved lines. There is the curved line that represents the effects of social and religious beliefs and practices, often as customs and habits. The third curved line represents the contribution of laws, policy directives, or other forms of practical application. Individuals or groups of actors may or may not realize they are guided by these systemic forces, but individuals don’t make choices in a vacuum. Individuals are influenced by beliefs and customs and act according to laws and protocols. To use just one illustration, the best way to

explain why 1 in 4 women will be raped in their lifetime is because certain social beliefs and practices, laws and applications of the law permit or encourage men to exercise power in this way.

It can be difficult to talk about, let alone grasp that there is a system or set of powerful invisible “forces” that connect to or set in motion individual incidents.

It can be quite a challenge to accept that individual incidents involve multiple causes of: a) personal responsibility and b) social and religious beliefs and c) policy, laws, rules or common practices. Yet, if you step back, it becomes clear that something more than individual choices is needed to explain what’s going on in our society. To be a human being is to be in relationships, and the three curved lines represent the forces that connect every individual in the many layered features of life that show up in the individual incidents and data we hear about in the news. **The diagram can’t do justice to the complexity of the situation, but it illustrates this central point.**

This is what the task force has come to realize; that is, the members believe there are systemic connections in U.S. culture that harm women in many ways. It is only when these many connections are recognized that one can explain the whole story adequately. **Some of the concepts used in this study to describe these forces or systems include SEXISM, PATRIARCHY, and sexual and gender harassment.** (Throughout this study, terms identified in capitalized bold will be found in the glossary.) It is important to stress that everyone, men and women, participates in and is affected by these and can contribute to them.

The diagram, however, also suggests how change can come about. Just as individuals get caught up in the harmful cycle pictured here, enough individuals can break the systemic outcome and can bring about change. Individuals can reject or challenge harmful social and religious belief. When enough individuals stand together, beneficial laws can be created and policy can be enforced. When these happen, incidents of harm are reduced dramatically. Systems are powerful, but they can be changed.

***Other modules in this study open up conversation about how to create changes.*

Questions for Participants:

1. How have you seen these harmful cycles broken?
2. How do you see situations and people creating change?

Sending Prayer:

Let us pray,

Fountain of love and giver of hope, we are filled with gratitude for all of your children in this circle. The love that radiates between us holds us up and gives us hope. We know that we are your children and you have made us beautiful, intelligent, resourceful, grateful, powerful human beings. AMEN (Connie Winter-Eulberg, 2017)

****Have participants fill out the RESPONSE FORMS for Module 1.
Collect them, and send to ELCA in Chicago.**