



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

A social message on ...*

Gender-based Violence

Gender-based violence is an ancient sin that for thousands of years has harmed countless women, children and men. It is a sin that Christians need to recognize, understand and confront, for our religious history also bears its stain. The following story from II Samuel 13 is a case in point. *(As a matter of self care, survivors may wish to skip Tamar's story or the side-bar boxes that illustrate gender-based violence.)*

TAMAR'S STORY: POWER AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Read II Samuel 13

¹⁹But Tamar put ashes on her head, and tore the long robe that she was wearing; she put her hand on her head, and went away, crying aloud as she went.²⁰

Her brother Absalom said to her, "Has Amnon your brother been with you? Be quiet for now, my sister; he is your brother; do not take this to heart." So Tamar remained, a desolate woman, in her brother Absalom's house.

²¹When King David heard of all these things, he became very angry, but he would not punish his son Amnon, because he loved him, for he was his firstborn.

Tamar was King David's daughter. Her half-brother Amnon, King David's firstborn son, raped her after he tricked her into his house. Then he threw her out on her own.

No one listened to Tamar. Amnon ignored her pleas not to rape her and not to cast her out. She courageously begged Amnon to follow Israel's laws and not sexually attack her. She tried to protect herself but could not.

Absalom, Tamar's brother, told her to be silent about Amnon raping her. Two years later, he killed Amnon.

King David did nothing. Although David was angry when he found out what Amnon had done, he protected Amnon because he

*With this social message on gender-based violence and its accompanying foundational documentation, the Church Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America speaks to both church and society. (Adopted Nov. 14, 2015.) Readers are encouraged to use the foundational documentation as a supplemental resource that provides fuller explanation and deeper analysis. Both are available at <http://www.ELCA.org/Faith/Faith-and-Society/Social-Messages>, select "gender-based violence."

Types of gender-based violence

Gender-based violence is physical, sexual, psychological, emotional or other personal harm inflicted on someone for gender-based reasons. It may include or characterize the following: Sexual and other physical assault, including murder; rape; sexual harassment (sometimes called bullying); sexual, physical and verbal abuse, including coercion; stalking; intimate relationship violence that includes employment, housing or educational intimidation and obstruction; elder abuse or child abuse; sex-specific torture; reproductive coercion; female genital mutilation; early and forced marriage; honor crimes; "mail-order" brides; dowry violence; practices used to decrease the number of girl babies, such as prenatal sex selection, infanticide or child neglect; sex tourism; forced prostitution; human trafficking for sex; pornography; and violence during armed conflict, including rape, enslavement, torture and murder.

wanted him to be the next king. He had the means to hold Amnon accountable and to care for Tamar. Instead, he was silent; he did not seek justice for her or become her ally.

Those who could have intervened on her behalf did not. *They* made her into "a desolate woman." (See II Samuel 13:1-33.) Tamar was silenced and isolated. She alone lamented what others had done to her.

David and others completely failed Tamar. She is not mentioned again in Scripture. Although God loved Tamar, she suffered from human violence in this broken and sinful world.

God also loved David. God sent prophets to confront him because his leadership often created a web of deceit, violence and silence. If only David, God's anointed king of Israel, had supported Tamar and been her ally in this web of power and violence! Tamar suffered from gender-based violence, and the consequences of that violence reverberated through Israel as a community.

God loved Israel, too. God's steadfast mercy endured their failures, but, out of that same love, God continually confronted them and called them to do good for all people, especially people who are harmed, like Tamar. The story of Tamar, Amnon, Absalom and David challenges us today as a call to God's people in Christ to respond to gender-based violence.

People continue to be harmed. Gender-based violence is a global evil that marks millions of lives. As a church of Jesus Christ, we deplore this suffering and we confess our collective and individual complicities

in this violence in both church and society. The complex factors that contribute to the prevalence of this sin are deeply woven into society and into individual lives.

As a member of Christ's body, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) shares in the brokenness and judgment brought on by gender-based violence. This church's members are survivors, perpetrators and bystanders. Like Amnon, we have violated others. Like David, we have protected perpetrators. Like Absalom, we have silenced survivors. Like all of them, we often have created a web of isolation, shame and desolation.

We also proclaim, however, that God loves us and seeks to restore and heal us through the power of the Holy Spirit. Like Tamar, this church in this message is speaking against gender-based violence. This church, which like King David has neglected to act in the past, is also beloved by God, inspired by the Spirit and called to confront this problem.

Adopted by the ELCA Church Council, this social message, with its foundational documentation, is one way to express that call.* This church commits itself to provide care, become educated, create accountability, and advocate. This church is responding to God's call to engage in this work as allies in the efforts to create safe and healthy communities.

WHAT MIGHT THIS CHURCH SAY PASTORALLY?

This church includes survivors, bystanders and perpetrators. Gender-based violence affects each differently—some with the terror of being hurt, some with the fear that comes from seeing or hearing about violence, and some with the brokenness of those who do violence to others.

Our bodies, hearts and minds are beloved by a gracious God who created each person in God's own image (Genesis 1:27) and redeemed us through Christ. God weeps with us because we hurt and betray each other. The body of Christ is wounded and longs for healing.

Words and acts of healing and reconciliation will be different for different people and circumstances. What is not different is each person's need for God's grace. Through words of pastoral care, this church, made of those who, at the same time, are both saints and sinners, can speak by the power of the Holy Spirit.

*See previous footnote.

Incidents across the country**

Two men severely beat and tortured a young gay man and then hung him on a country barbed-wire fence in Wyoming to die. (1998)

A sixth-grade New Jersey girl was sexually harassed every day by a boy, sometimes by groups of students. A female aide harassed her. A teacher witnessed one incident. The principal was "too busy" to meet with the harasser. Under doctor's orders the next year, she had to withdraw from school. (2012)

A transgender woman was shot in Michigan, her body so badly burned it took 11 days to identify her. (2013)

Three men broke into a home in Wisconsin and raped a woman who was six months pregnant after they beat her husband. (2014)

Two Ohio teen boys videotaped, photographed and tweeted images and commentary of their rape and hours-long assault on an unconscious teen girl. Dozens of students shared the images. At least three adults were indicted for obstruction. (2012)

**These are descriptive narratives of actual events. For reference information, see endnote number 21

With survivors:

God says "No!" to the violence inflicted on us by others. God is against gender-based violence because through it, someone has treated us like an object and violated our bodies, hearts and minds. God has created our whole being and loves us dearly, heart, mind and body.

Sometimes it seems as if faith is only about our hearts and minds, but faith is also about our bodies. One of our church's pastors writes, "Bodies which have been assaulted and abused are loved by Christ, anticipated in his death, redeemed through his incarnation and resurrection, and will be healed and restored in God's own time. The body remains precious despite the injury done to it."²

This is good news! God knows and loves us deeply. Our violated bodies are known by Jesus who was also exposed, tormented and wounded. He also cried out to ask why God had forsaken him in his deepest moments of need and fear (Mark 15:34). We are fully beloved, and God promises restoration and healing.

God does not intend for us to suffer through any abuse or violence. But we live in a broken and sinful world, and we do suffer. In spite of our suffering we need to have the courage to report what

has happened. The church is here to accompany us, to remind us that nothing shall separate us from grace and healing in Jesus Christ, not even the one(s) who hurt us (Romans 8:35).

Together we will speak and act on the promise of resurrection life in Christ, not only for the future but for healing in this life. God seeks to heal the effects of sin that we know too deeply; God's power and presence can bring new life to our bodies, minds and spirits.

With those who commit gender-based violence:

Because we are each beloved by God, God grieves deeply when we inflict gender-based violence on someone. The violence we impose hurts someone God created, and this hurt spreads out through the community.

Without self-control and giving priority to the need of others to be safe and healthy, we are vulnerable to abusing our strength, thought and action by being violent. We are responsible—and even if it does not seem like there is a way to stop, our recovery from being violent is our responsibility. God calls us to repent and to seek forgiveness.

Recovery is possible and takes a lot of work. We have to recognize that what we are doing or have done is wrong, and we have to want to change. We need professional help. Guilt may make us feel as if we can never really recover, but God's grace beckons us into new life.

Focus on living into God's grace, trusting God, and letting go of violence. The church is with us through Christ, to hold us accountable for what we have done, to find the help we need, and to help us live in the hope of restoration through God's grace.

With bystanders:

By the power of the Holy Spirit, we are connected to the pain and fear of others in the body of Christ. Yet gender-based violence affects not only the whole church but entire communities and ultimately all of society.

We are often compelled into silence and fear when we know about gender-based violence. We don't want to become targets ourselves. Or we may want to protect our status or that of others. But God calls each of us to take care of our neighbors far and near, including those who inflict violence and those who are harmed.

Each one of us has the responsibility through Christ to intervene in appropriate ways, to work toward healing, and to prevent gender-based violence. Just as God commands that no one has the right to kill another person, as Lutherans we also believe that God calls us to protect each other "from the wickedness and violence of others."³

1. WHAT IS GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE?

Gender-based violence is sin. While it takes many forms, in all its variations gender-based violence attacks, violates and often destroys the good that God brings to life.

Gender-based violence is physical, sexual, psychological, emotional or other personal harm inflicted on someone for gender-based reasons. It is important to remember that gender-based violence is not only domestic violence or violence among family members.

It occurs in the church, workplaces, the educational system, city streets, war, the military, and the health care system. It occurs, for example, by acquaintances, friends, strangers, caregivers, teachers, clergy, coaches, and work supervisors. Through this violence, someone creates or maintains power and control over someone else. God calls us to love. Gender-based violence is not love.

Governments, activists and experts have amply documented the wide-ranging and long-lasting destructive effects of this violence on victims and survivors, on family and friends, and on the whole human community. It creates not only personal suffering but also losses across the country—of peaceful communities, medical care costs and economic productivity. Gender-based violence is a public health and safety crisis.

As a community of faith, we also insist that this violence is an assault on spiritual life.

- It rejects the created goodness and dignity that God gives to every human creature.
- It violates the joy and freedom of the reconciled life accomplished through Jesus Christ and given by God for all humankind to enjoy, as individuals and in community.
- It attacks the gifts in each person that are given by the Holy Spirit for the common good.

Simply stated, gender-based violence in all its forms is a sinful rebellion against the triune God and a rejection of God's good work in this world.

As a church we recognize and deplore the horrific suffering caused by gender-based violence globally. This message focuses on the United States because we believe that this church has a distinct responsibility to address the violence in our own communities.

At the same time, we affirm that national and global analysis and efforts must be related. This church's global responsibilities depend upon many ecumenical, interfaith and secular partners with whom we are allies in the struggle against gender-based violence.⁴

2. WHO IS INVOLVED?

The scope of gender-based violence is vast. People of all incomes and of all ethnicities and all nations suffer violence inflicted on them by others for gender-based reasons. Gender-based violence happens in both private and public institutions. It occurs globally and nationally. It occurs within this church.

While many different people are affected by gender-based violence, certain people are particularly targeted. Research shows that women and girls are especially targeted; an estimated 40 million in the United States alone have suffered some form of gender-based violence.⁵ Girls are more vulnerable than women of other ages. Research also shows that nearly three-fourths of people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual and gender non-conforming have suffered some form of gender-based violence.⁶

The threat of violence shapes and constrains so many lives. All of these children of God live with the fear of or the memory of gender-based violence.

Heterosexual men and boys are also targets. There is increasing awareness in society of sexual, physical and psychological violence against heterosexual men and boys, particularly in sports, prisons, hospitals, churches and schools.

Research indicates that heterosexual men make up the majority of perpetrators. Among some gender-based crimes, some studies point to White men as the slightly largest group of male perpetrators, compared to other men⁷ in this country. As a community of faith, we need to ask difficult and compelling questions about why certain people are targeted and why certain people are perpetrators. This is an important part of the work toward understanding and healing that we must do.

All people need to work together to create change. As a community of faith, we cannot leave all the work to survivors. Men and boys are crucial leaders in this work.

3. WHY DO PEOPLE INFLICT GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE?

Voices across the ELCA**

A week after my hysterectomy, my husband dragged me off the couch by my hair and screamed, "Get off your ass and get to work!" Then he kicked me in the abdomen. I bled profusely while our daughters hid in their closet.

A trusted peer and friend sexually assaulted me at a Lutheran youth event. My mentor had little response. Nothing was ever resolved.

I tried to counsel an abusive husband and abused wife. During a session, he pulled a gun and killed her and himself.

When I was a teen, my pastor made me feel special. He coerced me into a long-term sexual relationship with him.

Four or five men gang-raped me after I marched in a gay pride parade. The only one who stopped to help me was a pastor going by on his bike. He covered my naked body with his jacket.

I attended a Lutheran college and was date-raped as a sophomore. I reported it to my dorm head, but it was hushed up and never investigated.

**These are descriptive narratives shared by members of the ELCA with permission or drawn from educational news sources.

Acts of gender-based violence always involve sinful individual choices to exercise power and control. The choice to inflict violence is a personal responsibility.

What an individual does is often influenced by personal factors. For example, alcohol and drug use does not cause gender-based violence, but it can increase the severity of harm. A person's experiences of familial violence or post-traumatic stress syndrome, for example, may increase the likelihood of gender-based violence.

While individuals are culpable, social systems influence individuals' actions. This church has proclaimed that God's grace calls us not only to confront individual sin, but also to confront sin in social systems.⁸

Social systems are interrelated social relations, habits, laws, ideas and beliefs in which *everyone* participates in varying ways. Social systems can contribute to good and evil. Both individual and social power can be used for good or for ill.

In the United States, for example, we have a social system that works in racist ways.⁹ It also works in patriarchal ways, that is, in ways

that assert and legitimize male superiority and male dominance.

Our society values, tends to identify with, and benefits some men more than other people.¹⁰ A patriarchal social system has various forms of

control over people, which can cause fear in women and girls and in people who are gender and sexually non-conforming. Gender-based violence is a powerful tool of fear and control.

The values of a patriarchal social system are readily apparent, for example, in media and gaming portrayals of women and men, the glorification of male sports and athletes, cultural complicity with commercial sexual exploitation,¹¹ and continuing gender-based bias in the legal system.¹²

The values of a racist social system intersect with patriarchal values in gender-based violence, as is readily apparent in the fact that women of color are particularly targeted. For example, often at the hands of outsiders, American Indian and Alaska Native women and girls suffer from gender-based violence at a much higher rate than all other women.¹³ Racism also affects the rate of reporting among communities of color, immigrants and citizens alike.¹⁴

The U.S. social system also functions in ways that devalue people according to age, ability, gender identity, sexual orientation, immigration status and ethnicity. All of these forms of privilege and oppression play a role in gender-based violence, including who is targeted and how readily a victim feels safe enough to report a crime of gender-based violence.

These various social system factors can cause immense harm. For example, they can lead to victim-blaming, failures to hold perpetrators accountable, and views that gender-based violence is so ordinary that it is inevitable.

Understanding the connection between patriarchy and gender-based violence is important in order to create change. There are also religious factors that aggravate the problems of gender-based violence. Most religions contribute in some way.

4. HOW DOES CHRISTIANITY SOMETIMES CONTRIBUTE TO THESE PROBLEMS?

For too long the whole human community has ignored, minimized, covered up, rationalized and justified the destructive effects of gender-based violence. We also acknowledge how the Christian community, a body with bystanders, perpetrators and survivors, has participated in this failing. Too often the Christian community has given its tacit or explicit consent to this violence. In doing so, Christian communities have too often betrayed the sources of faith.

Some instances of this betrayal demand particular attention. First, Christians have engaged in or tolerated the misuse of Scripture. Second, they have also distorted the message of God's forgiving mercy through Christ into a cruel demand to minimize or justify continued violence or abuse.

There are a number of ways Scripture is misused that can contribute to legitimizing gender-based violence. For example, the book of Genesis has been misused to argue for a God-given hierarchy of humans and a view that females are more sinful than males. New Testament texts referring to female submission and obedience to men are misused as a guidebook for contemporary relationships and as justification of corporal punishment.

Christians often ignore the diverse and complex names and metaphors for God in Scripture. This can lead to the impression that God should be viewed as male, further reinforcing the belief that females are more sinful than males and "lower" than males in creation.

Scripture is sinfully misused when it is used to excuse or legitimize violence that violates the life God gives in Jesus Christ. When Scripture is misused to establish a hierarchy among humans, it can become easy to see women and girls as less valuable and worthy than men and boys, thus legitimizing violence against them.

We see this, for example, in the long church history of blaming victims for rape and battery¹⁵ and in some of Martin Luther's own writing on relationships between husbands and wives.¹⁶ These views continue to be expressed whenever anyone is told that suffering because of gender-based violence is their cross to bear and that they should suffer like Jesus did.

Scripture is also distorted when Christians demand that survivors forgive perpetrators or bystanders easily and/or quickly. The treasure of God's forgiveness belongs to God. What God offers to repentant sinners is not for Christians to demand of anyone.

Christians are not in a position to demand forgiveness by others for others. Coercing someone to forgive may actually subvert healing and accountability.

Beyond the misuse of Scripture and forgiveness, Christian churches and individuals too often have contributed to gender-based violence through denial, resistance and a lack of preparation.

We are in denial when we avoid or refuse to see the broad and multiple realities of the problem. We are in denial when we misname problems, saying, for example, that sexual assault and rape are "just" hazing in certain settings. Resistance is apparent in silence and inaction or in the

ways we try to discredit hints or reports of violence. Both denial and resistance happen in society in general and in specific communities. It is hard to avoid denial and resistance, but it is important to overcome it.

At other times, we may not be stuck in denial or resistance, but we may not become the allies we should be through a lack of preparation and prevention. For example, having little or faulty knowledge, lacking partnerships with local organizations and other faith communities, and operating with inadequate policies and practices contribute to the problem.

In short, we must confess that Christians have too often contributed to victim-blaming, to failures to hold perpetrators accountable, to excuses for violence, and to subversion and curtailment of healing.

5. WHERE IS GOD IN THE MIDST OF THE PROBLEMS AND PAIN AND SUFFERING?

Despite these failures, this church believes that God is at work to heal and to restore. Despite the misuses of Scripture and forgiveness, we will abandon neither.

Every survivor is loved and cared for by God. God does not intend people to be hurt. God is with every victim. Scripture speaks of this, from God's sorrow over Israel's suffering to Jesus' pain on the cross.

The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us in Jesus of Nazareth. Time and again, Jesus' ministry took the form of healing pain. God, through the church, continues this ministry.

On the cross, Jesus Christ took on all sin and death for our sakes. We no longer need to live with death and sin upon us. And in the resurrection, God, through Christ, is making a new creation, mending what is broken and sending the healing presence of the Holy Spirit to dwell among us.

We know the presence and power of the triune God in word and sacrament, the means through which God is with us and forms us into the one body of Christ. As St. Paul reminded one early Christian community, what affects one member of the body affects every member of the body (1 Corinthians 12:26a).

Both harm and healing within the body of Christ belong to each and every one of us. As Luther taught, through the eating and drinking together in Christ, we participate in "all the unjust suffering of the

innocent, with which the world is everywhere filled to overflowing.”¹⁷ Having suffered through any member of the body of Christ who suffers, we are all always being made new by the Holy Spirit. Together.

From a Lutheran perspective, we understand God’s work in the world and in us through both law and gospel. We believe that we live under the law while we live *because* of the gospel. The Ten Commandments oppose human beings hurting each other. They are instructions on living faithfully with God and in community. Understanding that God condemns sin and promises grace helps us in the face of gender-based violence to confess our sin as a church, to renounce it, and to set clear boundaries against evil.

Because of God’s love for us, we are freed to live in the same love and care for others. Martin Luther talked about this freedom in Christ as freedom from bondage to sin and freedom for others—freedom to love the neighbor. This love and care—born of risk and listening to others—very often takes the form of justice-making.

This love and care leads us to join others of good will to be God’s hands in the midst of the problem. As Lutherans we affirm the value of good social-scientific analysis of the realities of violence as well as both civil and criminal law. These are God’s gifts in creation for countering the violence and bringing change.

By the power of the Holy Spirit, God’s grace is active in us to see the neighbor’s need and to respond to individuals and communities in crisis and recovery. God’s grace is also active in us to change the social and religious factors that may allow or encourage gender-based violence.

6. WHAT SHOULD WE DO?

This church, as one expression of the body of Christ, not only laments gender-based violence but also condemns it. This church commits itself to the many acts, steps and forms of healing it requires. We are called to create change in the various expressions of this church and in collaboration with our partners. We are also called to foster change within social and public spheres.¹⁸

A. WHAT ARE WE CALLED TO DO WITHIN THIS CHURCH?

Everyone can make a difference. Everyone is called to pray and to grow in awareness of this horrific tragedy. Many people are called to respond to particular situations. Like Tamar, many people are called to speak up.

Church members and leaders are called to be different from King David by actually taking up leadership. This includes becoming long-term allies with each other and with other agencies and institutions in the struggle against gender-based violence.

Many people in this church are already engaged in important efforts to address such violence, for which this whole church is thankful. They are instrumental in encouraging others.

Although specific actions will take shape differently among individuals, congregations, church leaders, social ministry organizations, and church-related institutions or other agencies of this church, there are common aims.

1. Recognize, name and root out the violence and its sources wherever it is happening.
2. Ensure care and create safe communities that foster healing.
3. Provide education.
4. Create accountability.

[See this message's foundational documentation for specific suggestions, section 6A and following.]

Recognize, name and root out

Historically much gender-based violence has not been recognized for what it is. This church has an opportunity to step forward to honestly recognize and name gender-based violence under such guises as "submission," or prostitution, or derogatory talk about people who are gender non-conforming. This church will be committed to careful work to identify sources in both church and society that foster, encourage or tacitly support gender-based violence and to root out these sources by, for example, naming them in sermons or discussing them in educational settings.

Ensure care and create safe and healing communities

Varied efforts are necessary to ensure care and create healing communities. When someone is hurt, people in this church need to respond effectively and in collaboration with experts.

Yet the best intervention and care will be possible when individuals, congregations and institutions have already taken steps in advance. Such steps might include hosting educational events, getting information to people safely, reaching out to experts in the field for guidance and partnerships, or opening a congregation's building to a support group. Intervention and care also include learning to identify signs of gender-based violence in order to respond proactively.

Survivors most often need expert care and pastoral care. Adequate care requires having in place networks of support beyond the initial crises. It also requires knowing how to access local expert care-giving and advocacy agencies. Caring for survivors takes wisdom, preparation and a position of support, rather than blame, for victims and survivors.

Perpetrators of intimate partner violence and other forms of gender-based violence need expert professional intervention and accountability. This is critical.

Perpetrators often seek pastoral care. Pastors and other leaders may accompany perpetrators with confession and repentance. Their repentance, however, does not require or automatically ensure forgiveness from the survivor, now or later. There are also times that this church or the civil law requires pastors and others to report violence and actively to seek to prevent further violence from occurring.

Provide education

Education is fundamental to creating safe and caring communities and contributes to prevention. For example, practical education about gender-based violence can occur in adult education forums, youth groups, college classrooms and continuing education events for rostered leaders. Such education will seek to offer comprehensive views, challenge mindsets, and teach wise responses to gender-based violence and its sources.

Education should also cover religious-based contributions to the problem. It should include, for example, probing historical and contemporary religious ideas that have caused harm. The benefits will become evident when members and leaders of the ELCA engage in dialogue, study and action among ecumenical partners to discern both roadblocks and resources within Christian theological and practical traditions.

Create accountability

Care must also be linked to clear accountability. Those who inflict gender-based violence need to be held accountable even while being cared for. This includes accountability to those harmed, to the public good and, sometimes, to the community of faith.

The critical need for accountability creates a role for this church in challenging the fact that the majority of perpetrators remain free and in communities. Communities of faith will by necessity have to wrestle with the need for accountability of perpetrators and the safety and well-being of survivors within the same community.

Careful attention to accountability in institutions will help prevent and counter acts of violence. Every agency, organization and institution should review its policies, or absence of such, to assess how well it provides for prevention, safety and adequate response. Attention to accountability assists in creating justice.

B. WHAT DO WE SEEK AND ADVOCATE BE DONE IN THE WIDER SOCIETY?

This church announces that the God who justifies expects all people and social institutions to do justice and foster practices that serve the common good.¹⁹ Seeking change in the social order to reduce gender-based violence requires multiple and varied measures in diverse spheres with a long-term commitment.

Advocacy and action will take shape differently when directed toward a local organization, a local community, or the state or federal sphere. They will be different when sought by individual Christians as citizens than when sought through the ELCA's various institutional efforts as a public church. Yet the common aim is to participate in robust advocacy and action that fosters safe and healthy communities. This church is encouraged to:

1. Become allies with others.
2. Seek improved laws and social patterns.
3. Challenge organizations and agencies to adopt and use policies and practices that prevent and reduce gender-based violence.

[See this message's foundational documentation for specific suggestions, section 6B and following.]

Become allies

Members of this church, congregational task forces, leaders of social ministry organizations and educational institutions, along with many others, will need to become allies with others in society to make clear what policies and practices will reduce gender-based violence. This church has the opportunity to demonstrate that faith communities can make a positive difference.

In determining what works and what is needed, the voices of those who are often silenced must be given a preferential hearing. Becoming allies toward change includes, for example, being advocates who seek improved laws and practices, challenging harmful mindsets and insisting on holding perpetrators accountable.

In other words, this church's social witness must be prophetic in

character.²⁰ It must call into question long-standing beliefs or practices with loving words and actions that challenge and may be uncomfortable.

Improve laws and social patterns

Addressing the root sources of gender-based violence will require time, informed and committed people, and systemic change through the development and application of laws and practices. While varied in form and differing in particular social spheres, the over-arching goals must be to name, protect, provide care, create accountability, foster education and challenge mindsets. This church, aware of its own failures, still must witness to and urge the pursuit of such goals within the social order, an order that ultimately answers to the God of justice.

Adopt and use policies and practices

Within the social order, a vast number of organizations and agents need to be challenged to adopt and use policies and practices that prevent or reduce gender-based violence. Employers and corporations, sporting organizations, educational institutions, the health care system, public and private social caregivers, the judicial system, the military, and members of the media and emerging social media are among those to be challenged. Again, this church has a role to play through its members in these various spheres and in raising its collective and institutional voice.

7. CONCLUSION

As God's church we are David, Amnon, Absalom and Tamar. Like King David, we have the means to intervene. Like Amnon, we commit gender-based violence. Like Absalom, we both silence victims and are tempted to retaliate with further violence. Like Tamar, we are targets of violence and try to resist it.

This is the time to speak and to listen, to deeply and honestly know the pain in the body of Christ and throughout the world. This is the time for survivors to speak and to be heard. This is the time to break the silence. This is the time to respond with wisdom and compassion through action and words. This is the time to wisely care for perpetrators and to hold them accountable.

This is the time to change policies, strengthen laws and challenge systemic factors that create and foster gender-based violence. This is the time to transform negative religious influences and to improve prevention and response within this church.

The evil of gender-based violence necessitates different kinds of efforts from congregations, leaders, synods, the churchwide organization, and church-related social ministries and educational institutions—and it pleads for a collective response.

May the triune God empower and direct us to name the problems, ensure wise care, provide education, create accountability, and become courageous and wise allies in creating safe and healthy communities.

ENDNOTES

1 Gender refers to categories into which cultures/societies separate behaviors and characteristics that are usually considered masculine or feminine. The most common gender identities are *woman* and *man*, but other identities exist and are becoming more widely used and understood.

2 Joy A. Schroeder, “Sexual Abuse and a Theology of Embodiment: Incarnating Healing,” in *The Long Journey Home*, ed. Andrew J. Schmutzer (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 193.

3 Martin Luther, Large Catechism in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 411.

4 See, e.g., “Churches Say No to Violence Against Women,” available on www.Lutheranworld.org.

5 See the related foundational documentation of this social message on gender-based violence for statistics at the time of publication and for more extensive analysis and information suggested in this message.

6 There is, of course, an intersection between these two aggregate groups of people particularly targeted. Girls and women may be lesbian, bisexual or gender non-conforming.

7 The most recent studies of hate violence show that in 2013, 39 percent of perpetrators were perceived as White by victims, the highest percentage compared to other racial or ethnic backgrounds. Of all men who perpetrate gender and sexuality-based hate violence, the highest percentage is found among those 19 to 29 years old (30.7 percent). 72.45 percent of all perpetrators were male as opposed to female or transgender. See Osman Ahmed and Chai Jindasurant, *Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and HIV-Affected Hate Violence in 2013* (New York: National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs, 2014), 51-53.

8 ELCA social statement “The Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective” (Chicago: ELCA, 1991), esp. 4-5, 7. <http://www.ELCA.org/Faith/Faith-and-Society/Social-Statements/Church-in-Society>.

9 ELCA social statement “Freed in Christ: Race, Ethnicity, and Culture” (Chicago: ELCA, 1993). <http://www.ELCA.org/Faith/Faith-and-Society/Social-Statements/Race-Ethnicity-and-Culture>.

10 See, e.g., “ELCA Message on Community Violence” (Chicago: ELCA, 1994), 4. <http://www.ELCA.org/Faith/Faith-and-Society/Social-Messages/Community-Violence> and “ELCA Message on Commercial Sexual Exploitation” (Chicago: ELCA, 2001), 2, 4. <http://www.ELCA.org/Faith/Faith-and-Society/Social-Messages/Commercial-Sexual-Exploitation>.

11 “ELCA Message on Commercial Sexual Exploitation,” esp. 5, 7.

12 See the foundational documentation for greater detail, section 3.

13 American Indian and Alaska Native women are targets of gender-based violence at a rate of 37.5 percent; among all women in the United States, the aggregate rate is 25 percent. For further information, see the Appendix in the foundational documentation for global and national statistics at the time of publication.

14 For a discussion of risks for marginalized communities, see ELCA social statement “The Church and Criminal Justice: Hearing the Cries” (Chicago: ELCA, 2013), esp. 13. <http://www.ELCA.org/Faith/Faith-and-Society/Social-Statements/Criminal-Justice>.

15 See biblical texts portraying gender-based violence; for further explanation of these texts, see Joy A. Schroeder, *Dinah's Lament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007).

16 See, e.g., Martin Luther, “Titus, 1527,” *Luther's Works*. (American ed. 55 vols. Philadelphia: Fortress Press; St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955-1986), 29:55.

17 Martin Luther, “Word and Sacrament I” *Luther's Works*, 35:54.

18 For specific resources, please go to www.ELCA.org/Our-Work/Publicly-Engaged-Church/Advocacy.

19 ELCA social statement “For Peace in God’s World.” (Chicago: ELCA, 1995). <http://www.ELCA.org/Faith/Faith-and-Society/Social-Statements/Peace>.

20 “The Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective.”

21 “Incidents across the country” are summarized from the following sources: a) Matthew Shepard Foundation, <http://www.matthewshepard.org/about-us/>; b) Michelle Caffrey (July 14, 2014) Williamstown Middle School student faced severe sexual harassment, school did nothing, lawsuit claims, *South New Jersey Times* http://www.nj.com/gloucester-county/index.ssf/2014/07/williamstown_middle_school_student_faced_severe_and_pervasive_sexual_harassment_and_school_did_nothi.html; c) Gus Burns (Dec. 10, 2013) Medical examiner identifies body of transgender woman found shot, burned in Detroit trash bin, *Michigan Live* http://www.mlive.com/news/detroit/index.ssf/2013/12/medical_examiner_identifies_bo.html; d) Associated Press (March 13, 2014) Blind man beaten, pregnant wife raped in Wisconsin home invasion, police say, Fox News <http://www.foxnews.com/us/2014/03/13/wisconsin-home-invaders-beat-blind-husband-raped-pregnant-wife-police-say/>; e) Juliet Macur and Nate Schweber (Dec. 16, 2012) Rape Case Unfolds on Web and Splits City, *New York Times* http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/17/sports/high-school-football-rape-case-unfolds-online-and-divides-steubenville-ohio.html?_r=0.

A social message on ...
Gender-based Violence

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