

# ‘Miss Representation’

## A Theological Response to the Media

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A study created by the ELCA Women and Justice Social Statement Task Force

### *To the Leader:*

Thank you for taking on the task of facilitating discussion on the film “Miss Representation.” This study comes in three sessions. Each session contains a Bible verse and an opening prayer, about 30 minutes of the film, discussion questions and a closing prayer. A full hour is ideal for each session.

This study can be spaced over three weeks of a study group or forum or used in a single afternoon in a retreat setting or other all-day event. The questions are appropriate for adults as well as teenagers, but please feel free to tailor the sessions to fit your group’s needs. Note: if you are considering using this study with a younger group, please be advised it contains some rough language and sexual imagery that you will need to work with accordingly.

This guide encourages participants to talk about what they have seen as well as share their personal stories. Most will want to do this and it makes your role as facilitator easier. Your primary goal should be to provide a sacred space for conversation and the sharing of personal stories. Seek a balance that works for your study participants between small groups of four or five that encourage individual sharing and full group conversation in which ideas can be heard by everyone.

You can reinforce the stories you hear by crafting the closing prayer using statements and concerns from the group. This must be done with great sensitivity. The closing prayer can be done by you, or you may invite someone else to lead it. Coordinate who will be leading the closing prayer in advance, so that the prayer leader can take notes informally during discussion.

### Supplies needed:

A television and DVD player with adequate seating where everyone can see and hear  
Printouts of discussion questions (if desired)  
Pens and paper  
Two large poster-sized sheets (Session Three only)  
Markers (Session Three only)

# Session One:

## Body Image and Our Young Girls

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"The media is the message and the messenger."

**Set-up:** arrange seating around the television screen. If desired, provide copies of the discussion questions for all participants. Provide the leader of the closing prayer with paper and pen to take notes for the aforementioned petitions.

**A reading from Matthew:**

*"The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness."* Matthew 6:22

**Opening prayer:**

Let us pray.

God of all creation, you are the light of the world. You sent your Son into the world to bring light to the darkness and recover the sight of the blind. Fill us with your light, O God, so that we may be a light for others. Especially we ask that in this study you would provide us new insights through this discussion together. We ask this through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

Start the video from the beginning. Watch the first 34 minutes, then stop for discussion. (If you are short of time, you can cue up the film to the 2-minute mark without losing too much content). Remind your closing prayer leader to take notes of appropriate petitions.

**Discussion questions:**

1. The film tells the story of its creator, Jennifer Siebel Newsom, who channeled her pain inward from an early age and had to fight her way out. Newsom started acting, only to find that her agent wanted her to lie about her age and her Master's Degree in Business. What does this say about Hollywood to you?
2. The film states that 78 percent of 17-year-old girls are unhappy with their bodies. Why do you think that is? How can we encourage a more positive self-image for our young women and men?
3. The film suggests that selling cosmetics and beauty products is a lucrative industry. How is the advertising for these products sending our young people the wrong message about themselves and their bodies?

4. Reread the words from Matthew 6:22. How does this passage connect with what you have seen in the film?
5. Did you realize how heavily advertisers touched up photos and photoshopped models' bodies? Does this change your perception of beauty as defined by the media?
6. What might our faith speak to the sexualization of America's young women?
7. What are some practical ways for us to allow young women to find a path to personal confidence other than the one offered by the media?
8. What do you think teenaged girls would say if they saw and talked about this video? What would teenaged boys say?  
[If you have teenagers in your group of adults, this may be a good time to gently encourage them to share their thoughts and raise their concerns.]
9. Many of the people in the video were worried for someone. For whom are you worried?

**Closing prayer:**

Let us pray.

God of all, we pray with concern for all of us, and especially the young, as we are bombarded with the message that beauty is solely physical. We lift up to you our fears that youth see themselves through the eyes of the media, who especially profit from making women objects of desire. We pray for the girls we know and, the youngest of women in our congregations, schools and neighborhoods who are in danger of believing how the media defines them. We pray for the boys we know and the youngest men in our congregations who are in danger of seeing women as the media defines them.

*(Speak petitions here that came up in the discussion.)*

God, we lift up your sons and daughters, putting them into your loving care. Preserve them and bless them. Give them wisdom beyond their years, and work through us to encourage them to grow in faith and love. Amen.

## Session Two: Objectification of Women in Leadership

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"We still observe the physicality, not the content."

**Set-up:** arrange seating around the television screen. If desired, provide copies of the discussion questions for all participants. Provide the leader of the closing prayer with paper and pen to take notes for the aforementioned petitions.

Cue the video to the 34-minute mark.

### **A reading from Proverbs:**

*Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain; but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.* Proverbs 31:30

### **Opening prayer:**

Let us pray.

You created us men and women, both in your own image. Through your Son we are all one in the body of Christ. You call us all to be co-creators with you and to witness to the presence of your kingdom in this world. Through Christ, we ask that you partner with us now, O Lord, and help us to strive for equality in our public discourse, our workplaces, and in our congregations. In the name of the Triune God, Amen.

Play the video until the one hour mark, stopping when Geena Davis finishes discussing the film "A League of Their Own." Proceed to the discussion questions.

### **Discussion questions:**

- 1) A quote from the film: "The emphasis on women's appearance affects more than just women on screen. It is affecting women's ability to participate in the political process. Ironically, the more power women gain, the stronger the backlash against them." In general, do you think we, as a society, treat female leaders more harshly than male leaders? Can you think of examples?
- 2) In Session One, were you surprised to learn that the United States is 90<sup>th</sup> in the world in regard to women being in leadership positions? Why or why not?
- 3) The film discusses how women in politics are treated poorly by the media. One example was using the title "Mrs. Clinton" in referring to Hillary Clinton as Secretary of State. Do you think using her married name diminishes her accomplishments? Why or why not?

- 4) Reread the quote from Proverbs 31. Having seen the film, how do you read the passage differently? In your congregation are women lifted up for their strong faith and God-fearing ethics? How can you do it more often?"
- 5) The film suggests that as women gain power in public office and private businesses, they are symbolically losing power in the media. The film specifically points to reality television as the "contemporary backlash against women's rights." Why might this be happening? Do you believe this is a coincidence or intentional?
- 6) There is a fine line between looking pleasing and attractive and also looking professional. Geena Davis pointed out that G-rated female characters were just as likely to be shown wearing sexually revealing clothing as characters in R-rated movies. In what ways do women and young girls feel pressured to perpetuate the current system that objectifies women?
- 7) The film points to a high number of female journalists and news anchors who were objectified and sexualized. Why does this happen? What does this suggest about news shows as information versus entertainment? What can be done about it?
- 8) The film encourages us to lift up women in our communities for being strong leaders. Whom in your life do you look up to for being a strong woman? Think also of some women (young or old) who with a little support could go on to do great things.

**Closing prayer:**

Let us pray.

God of mercy, you created us, male and female, so that we may complement each other. Yet we find ourselves in a world nearly void of compliments for women in leadership. Help us not only to see these injustices in our society but also to speak out against them. And, allow us not only to raise awareness for strong women in leadership, but also to celebrate them. We especially lift up:

*(Speak petitions here that came up in the discussion.)*

We give thanks for the calling you have given to the strong women in our lives. Support all of your people to see them as you see them, as God-fearing women worthy of our trust, admiration and respect. Amen.

## Session Three: The Media and the Church

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"We see the world and we replicate the world we grew up in."

**Set-up:** arrange seating around the television screen. If desired, provide copies of the discussion questions for all participants. Provide the leader of the closing prayer with paper and pen to take notes for the aforementioned petitions.

You will need two poster-sized sheets of paper and some markers for a group activity. Set them up in different rooms or opposite sides of your room.

### **A reading from Romans:**

*For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words ... We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.*  
Romans 8: 24-26, 28

### **Opening prayer:**

Let us pray.

Dear God, you have saved us from our sins. Yet, we regret that we often do not learn from our mistakes. We regret that we often only see the world we grew up in and replicate it. Still, your Spirit gives us hope for what we have not seen. Send your Spirit to intercede for us, so we may be called according to your purpose.

Cue the video to the one-hour mark and watch until the end. After the video, divide up the participants into two groups. Give each group a large poster-sized piece of paper to write on. Ask the first group (*so that the other group cannot hear*) to compose a list of responses that address the question:

*What made us angry about this film and what the media is doing?*

Then, go to the second group and privately tell them to compose a list answering the question:

*In what ways do we passively accept what the media does?*

Give the groups five to eight minutes to write. Each group will need a secretary and a presenter. If there are men and women in the room, encourage sharing the two leadership roles in a way that promotes gender equality.

Once the groups have finished, hang the two lists next to each other on a wall and gather both groups together.

**Ask the question:**

What do you see in these two lists? What are the similarities and differences?

*[Leaders, many ideas will come up here, but among others it is important to challenge participants to think about how all of this is about a system; that is, ultimately, all of us engage in passive consumer behavior that contributes to the problem. The problem is a system in which we all participate but together can change.]*

When that conversation has run its course, you can ask some of these questions with your remaining time.

- 1) Now that you have seen the film in its entirety, what do you think of its ability to address effectively the issue of women in the media?
- 2) Where is God in all of this? Is God on television or in magazines?
- 3) Where is the church in all of this? What roles does faith play in all this?
- 4) In what ways do we carry the media's message of objectifying and degrading women into the sanctuary or Bible study?
- 5) Do we carry the media's message to the election of leaders in the congregation? The synod? The ELCA?
- 6) We have observed that "the media we follow tell us what is Important." How have you found this to be true, and what can be done about it?
- 7) Reread the passage from Romans 8. How do you read the passage now? What do we hope for?

**Closing prayer:**

Let us pray.

God of justice, we work for change in a hectic world. We strive for equality of women and men that we don't always find on TV, in film, on the Internet, and in print. And still, we have hope. We have hope in the future, because your Spirit intervenes on our behalf. We especially have hope for:

*(Speak petitions here that came up in the discussion.)*

Thank you, God, for entrusting us with your work in the world. Grant us strength to hope for things yet unseen and the courage to get us there. Amen.