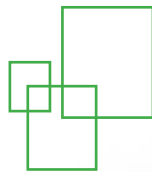




**Evangelical Lutheran  
Church in America**

God's work. Our hands.



## **Our Voices, Our Stories:** Sexism in Church and Society





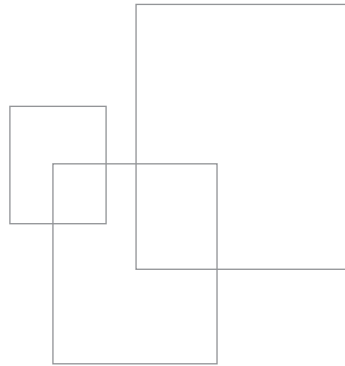
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## **Our Voices, Our Stories:** Sexism in Church and Society

Edited by Mary J. Streufert, Ph.D.,  
Director for Justice for Women,  
Office of the Presiding Bishop,  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America



## Introduction

*Disbelief.* This compilation of monologues represents the hidden life of women in church and society. It is representative of what women in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and across the country experience every day. Each woman has offered her story, some at personal risk, in order to assist this church both to understand and to recognize the problems of sexism and patriarchy. It is worth noting that it is not safe at all times to be identified. This collection includes ten contributions from women of color; some of these stories explicitly name race as a central issue; others do not. There is also one monologue from a man. There are, of course, hundreds and thousands more stories. They exist in your congregation, synod and community. This book is about seeing differently—about seeing the world and what really happens.

It is the hope of the Justice for Women program that you will be able to use these stories to educate yourself and others—and to add to them.<sup>1</sup> Only by naming and looking at the problems of sexism and patriarchy are we in a place to begin to understand them.

This book grows from over two years of ongoing education on sexism and patriarchy, using these monologues, in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America through the Justice for Women program. Although few of the narratives explicitly use the words patriarchy or sexism, each one is about these social and religious realities. Even using these words is a form of telling the truth because they are words that make many of us uncomfortable. We are not ordinarily accustomed to using these words boldly in the church.

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<sup>1</sup> To submit your own narrative, contact the Justice for Women program through their online submission form for monologues, found at [www.elca.org/justice-forwomen](http://www.elca.org/justice-forwomen), where you will be able to access further collections of monologues.

To provide some basis of common language, here is a brief definition of each of these words. Patriarchy is a type of society in which all people, males and females, participate. This does not mean that males are bad and females are good; rather, it means that the ways we create reality together, all of us, places males in a hierarchy of value and authority over females. We function as a body, a system, or a group in ways that promote male privilege by, according to sociologists, “*being male dominated, male identified and male centered.*” This means you could look at aspects of a society or a religion and evaluate ways that these aspects promote male privilege. A patriarchal society also operates from “an obsession with control and involves as one of its key aspects the oppression of women.”<sup>2</sup>

Sexism refers to that which promotes male privilege.<sup>3</sup> So, in a patriarchal society, sexist legal codes, media, educational systems, or language promote male privilege. Sexism is expressed on a variety of social and religious levels. Sexism is part of the social system of patriarchy.<sup>4</sup>

Even in their truth-telling role, these monologues are woven with a new vision for the present. The contributors to this first collection of narratives share the desire that in and through their truth-telling, you, as readers and listeners, will find the curve of hope to change the present, right where you are.

What can you do? Perhaps most importantly, you can listen. You can take to heart what you read here, knowing that a real person stands behind every one of these stories. You

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<sup>2</sup> Allan G. Johnson, *The Gender Knot: Unraveling Our Patriarchal Legacy* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005), 5. Italics in original.

<sup>3</sup> Johnson, 17.

<sup>4</sup> 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. For more information on terminology, see the Justice for Women Web site at [www.elca.org/justiceforwomen](http://www.elca.org/justiceforwomen).

can use this book in as many places as you are able, especially throughout the church. Perhaps you would like to use it in a text-based study group. Perhaps you would like to gather a number of performers and stage these monologues, however formally or informally you choose. Perhaps you would like to film your group and post it online. Perhaps you would like to create your own set of monologues<sup>5</sup>—and share it with others in the church, including the Justice for Women program of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. No matter the mode of speaking and learning you choose, you can speak up and speak out, encouraging dialogue on sexism and patriarchy in the many places you find yourself. One especially important way to encourage such conversation is to ask questions so that together, groups of people find ways to name what happens and find avenues to disrupt the ways sexism and patriarchy affect all of us.<sup>6</sup>

For the church, sexism is a theological issue. We are each called through baptism to respect and protect each person made in the image of God. The writers of these stories offer them for that purpose.

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5 Future sets of monologues could focus on the experiences of women of color, men, teenagers, community elders, GLBTQ persons, etc.

6 For further resources to encourage and facilitate dialogue in communities on sexism and patriarchy, please see the Justice for Women Web site at [www.elca.org/justiceforwomen](http://www.elca.org/justiceforwomen).



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## “Directed to the Door”

When I checked in at the conference I thought that the name on his tag was familiar, although I knew that I had never met him. When I looked more closely, I saw that underneath Professor Man’s name was printed my alma mater, “Small Conservative Lutheran College,” (SCLC) which I had attended in the 1980s. He recognized my name as well, although he admitted that he could not place me. “Well,” I said, “I will give you a hint. I graduated from SCLC, and 15 years later applied for a position in the theology department which I did not get.” He nodded, knowingly, and said “Oh yes, yes, I remember now. Well you do know,” he volunteered, “why you did not even get an interview?” Startled by his willingness to freely share, I confessed that I did not know. “Well, you’re a woman,” he pronounced triumphantly.

It is difficult to describe the emotions that I experienced at the moment he uttered a phrase that is both true and—in the context of his department—a statement of my public “deficiency.” What I can describe is that I was surprised by their intensity, even as I was not surprised by his pronouncement. SCLC, though it considers itself a “liberal” institution within its denomination, nevertheless remains firmly in the grip of a board of directors who are against women’s ordination. This belief that women are not qualified for the priesthood manifests itself in attitudes about women in general, female students in particular. When I attended, this perspective was nowhere more evident than in the make-up of the faculty of the religion department, comprised entirely of white, male, seminary-educated professors, who provided no mentoring for female students who might wish to teach any grade higher than fifth. At SCLC, young men were groomed to make decisions about graduate

school or the seminary, women for employment in private schools where curriculum decisions would be made for them; young men were directed toward upper division theology classes and language study, women were directed to the door; young men were mentored, young women married off. But it had been 20 years since I had been in that type of environment, so I confess I was surprised when I was “directed to the door” once again.

The distance between the woman I am and the girl I once was is measured in my reaction to those words. While his statement did emotionally unhinge me for the remainder of the conference, nevertheless in the public realm I went into “professor” mode: I moderated, presided, presented, answered, articulated, led a business meeting, and was gracious and helpful to nervous graduate students in my discipline, all of whom were male. In between public activity I commiserated with my colleagues, slept badly, ate little and—oddly—cried for a job I never got, at a college that never wanted me, for students I would never teach. And while the public side of me was the very model of the mentor I had once needed, privately I was once again the girl no one would mentor. I found myself avoiding Professor Man, fearful that he would see me and know that I burned with shame for being identified as “female” once again.

As I reflect on that weekend, I wonder why I felt any shame at all, when SCLS should feel the shame for allowing sexism to interfere with the liberal arts education of all of their students.

*Brenda Llewellyn Ihssen, Ph.D.*



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## **“Great Job”**

I was working on a project with two male colleagues. I played a leading role in conceptualizing the project and finding the money to do it. At every planning meeting I took the notes and did all the follow-up work. Once the event came around, we had to carry many items to the meeting room and prepare a lot of photocopies. All of this was left to me—although it was too much work for one person to do. Yet when the event was concluded, everyone congratulated my older male colleagues on a job well done.

*Name withheld by request*



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## **“Little Lady”**

I wish I could tell you who I am because telling the truth is important. But as you’ll see from my story, you can’t ignore power and politics.

At a congregation council meeting early in my call as an associate pastor, parishioners came to raise their concerns over being a Reconciling in Christ congregation and allowing PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Gays and Lesbians) to meet in the church building.

The members who came to the council meeting were upset, saying that we were promoting homosexuality. They were very angry and vocal and the council allowed them to say whatever they wanted.

I couldn’t remain silent anymore when one of them, a retired white man, expressed his “tolerance” by saying, “I will sit next to ‘one of them’ just like I’ll sit next to a nigger.”



I stood up and said, “You cannot use language like that in the church. You are welcome to your opinions, but your language is unacceptable. You’ll need to leave if you cannot keep your comments appropriate.”

He told me, “You need to sit down, little lady. I can say whatever I want.”

No one in the room came to my defense.

I sat down because there was nothing else I could do.

And I learned early on about power and the church and my place, as well as that of my silenced sisters and brothers.

*Name withheld by request*



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## **“Lucky”**

I am Linda Norman. I’m ordained in the ELCA. During my first year of seminary at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, I was embarking on my search for teaching parish sites. I visited a south side congregation along with another seminarian, a man.

I thought the worship service went well—and even the fellowship afterward was good. Although the congregational leadership was clearly predominantly male, there were no obvious indications of sexist attitudes. Until we were about to leave.

My colleague went to get the car, and as I waited for him, one of the elders of the congregation started a conversation with me. He said, “The other elders and I have been talking. It’s been a good day! You know, you’re lucky. You’re lucky because I’m becoming okay with women in ministry. If you had asked us to be your teaching parish a year ago, you would not have been so lucky.”

I decided against this teachable moment, and I sometimes regret that decision. I placed that congregation on my list of preferences, though. You know, I figured I would have to learn how to handle this type of reception.

I ended up being assigned to a congregation with a female pastor. I think God knew what I needed.



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### **“Speaking ‘He’”**

Every year I have been a pastor, I have participated in vacation Bible school. It is a great opportunity to spend a week focusing exclusively on children, getting to know them and having them get to know me and feel comfortable around me. The plus is that I get to wear shorts and a T-shirt. The challenge is that I still have to write a sermon, visit people in the hospital and so forth in the afternoons. By the end of the week, I’m exhausted!

This year we did a joint Bible school program with another Lutheran church so I was less involved, and instead of participating in the openings, I was a teacher and “shepherd” for the preschool children. It was great fun. Each day there was a theme, a Bible verse, and a song that the children learned and repeated over and over again. One day the theme was “God does what he says he will do.” The leader always and only referred to God as “he.” The songs all referred to God as “he” and so the children constantly repeated, talked about, and sang about a God who is “he.”

As I sat there with the kids, I wondered—Am I the only one who notices this? Does this bother anyone else? How many biblical images of God are there? What about the deeply theological work behind expansive language for God? We were indoctrinating children into an exclusively

male image of God and it didn't seem like anyone noticed or cared! And I did nothing about it! I didn't know what to do. I was afraid of any reaction I would get if I tried to change anything. People would think I was simply over-reacting or crazy. What is my problem?! So I did nothing, knowing full well that using exclusively male images of God perpetuates a sexist view of girls and women. A case in point: It is perfectly acceptable to refer to God as "he," but if we referred to God as "she" there would be a huge uproar, even though male and female are created in God's image. The fun and excitement of being with and teaching children about the love of God was overshadowed for me by this long, tiring journey of dealing with sexism. Maybe that is why I was so exhausted this year after Bible school.

*Name withheld by request*



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### **“What’s a Girl to Do?”**

I have always disliked Barbie dolls.

My mother had a full set of Barbie dolls from her childhood that were bestowed to me as the oldest girl when I “came of age.” The Barbies had a carrying case with stands and small doors that opened into closets filled with beautiful, colorful Barbie clothes for every occasion (related to parties and housekeeping) a girl could ever imagine! I dutifully played with them, but never took a particular liking to the stretched, plastic figures.

Around the same time in second grade, I had a birthday, for which I had a wonderful party with my best girlfriends, who each had their own Barbie-blond hair and Barbie-blue eyes. I did not. I had black hair and almond-shaped, brown eyes. (Sometimes I sat at the mirror and wondered why that

was, and at times especially thought that perhaps my hair might turn blonde as I got older—like my friends’ mothers’ hair turned from blonde to brown as they got older.)

On that fateful April day, I opened my first brown-haired, brown-eyed, brown-skinned Barbie. She wore a white shark-skin long-sleeved dress with a purple bodice. Jessie said to me, “She’s the only one who looked like you.” I said, “Thanks,” as I peered at Brown Barbie through her protective, plastic window into the world. But she really didn’t look like me. She was not Asian.

Later that year, I ripped the heads off all the Barbies I had access to, including my mother’s collection and my “look alike.” I flushed them down the toilet and into our septic tank, much to my mother’s despair—all for the want of black hair and an Asian profile.

What’s a girl to do?

*Name withheld by request*



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## **“Bathroom Caucus”**

I am now a bishop in the ELCA.

As a young woman I was probably more susceptible to sexual harassment than my male colleagues were. Neither church nor society had good definitions or policies or preventive measures at that time. We were just coming off the sexual revolution and hadn’t really come to terms with how it is for men and women to co-exist, without sexualizing each other. (Not that we’ve got it all figured out now, but at least we’ve made a start.)

As a young woman I experienced sexual advances from colleagues (never the ones I worked most closely with), from constituents (parishioners/students), and from a janitor in a university building.

When new women, both lay and clergy, came to the national campus ministry conference for the first time, we caucused in the women's bathroom and shared stories about whom to avoid among our colleagues.

*Name withheld by request*



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## **“Institutional and Interpersonal”**

**Institutional:** I went back to school to enhance my knowledge and skills for my vocation in the church. The day I returned to my position after an approved leave-of-absence, I was told that my position description had been changed and I had been put into a lower payscale. Although my responsibilities were exactly the same, my position description had been reworded. My actual salary was not lowered; however, the salary cap on the new pay scale is prohibitive, affecting what I'll be able to earn for the rest of my career and my future pension contributions as well.

**Interpersonal:** A male colleague sought out a group of women eating lunch and asked one of us to go back to her desk immediately to do a routine task he knows how to do. His request was baffling since he knows how to do this himself. What was the motivation for his disturbing a colleague's lunch with what could be considered a non-urgent request?

*Name withheld by request*



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## “Ordained Fertility”

There have been a number of “good natured” jokes about interns scheduling the birth of their first child to happen during internship year. Everyone smiles and enjoys cooing at the baby, when her mother brings her to campus for a visit. It seems perfect that the seminarian will enter first call with a toddler, rather than a new infant to distract him from his work. Most, if not all, of these interns are men.

Unlike our male counterparts, who can respond to new fertility studies that point toward the mid-to-late twenties as the “perfect” window for childbearing, in my experience most of my female peers have felt that they must postpone having children until after they graduate or later. Three years ago at an ELCA seminary, I remember conversations about “timing” and fertility among female seminarians to be furtive and done only in company that could be trusted. Warranted or not, there was fear that if we were open about intending to have a baby in the near future, we might not pass final approval or get a call.

In our senior year, the fearful doubts were broached. All the fourth year seminarians were invited to a Q and A session with the bishops. At least four of the seminarians were married women in our late twenties or early thirties. One woman asked the bishops about timing and fertility. But rather than calm our fears, the answer increased them.

The small group of male bishops said, “Well, you have two options. You get off-track and postpone first call and ordination until after you’ve had your child and they are old enough not to need you. Or you can exercise some patience, and serve your first call before you have a child.”

When asked further about female pastors having children on first call, they said, “Oh no, I wouldn’t do that. You shouldn’t have a child and break your congregation’s trust until you’ve been there for at least two to three years. In fact, the ELCA now lets women take up to three years off after first-call for further education or maternity leave—so you wouldn’t even have to go off roster.”

I then asked about babies in first call for associate pastorates. The response was not to “bank on this, since there are so few of those positions. And how do you propose to take care of your baby if you do that—do you really think you could handle it? And do you really think that that’s what’s best for your baby—and for the church for that matter?” This is not the kind of question a male seminarian would be asked, even though parenting certainly is more equally divided between men and women now than it has been previously.

Interestingly, in the case of three of the women who were at the session, the bishop’s conceptions of the church were not accurate. Despite the bishops’ warnings, these three women each decided to have very transparent discussions about either being pregnant or hoping to become so soon with the congregations with whom they were applying for associate pastorates. In each case the congregation was thrilled and accepting. In one case, this resulted in a dual baptism/ordination service. But perhaps this is not the norm.

*Name withheld by request*



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## **“Only Part of Me”**

For the past nine months I have served as a missionary through Young Adults in Global Mission in a small village in eastern Slovakia, and I have grown close to these people. I’m

leaving in one short week with no idea how, when, or even if I'll come back. I've already told everyone that I'm coming back for my honeymoon—once I find somebody to marry. But this is where the problem is. What if the person I marry is not okay with them? What if they find out that I'm not straight? What if I fall in love with and marry a woman and not a man? I consider these things and am reminded once again why no matter how hard I work at it, and no matter how much people open up to me, I will never feel like I can be part of this community.

Coming from a home life where each person I came out to gave me a big hug, I could never have imagined what it would be like to hear the words “Sodom and Gomorrah” brought up in each sermon or Bible study for the first months I was here. Within the first week of arriving in the village, I had a discussion, albeit a very broken discussion, with my host mom about homosexuality. That conversation went well, perhaps because the most sophisticated message I could state was that homosexuality was not unnatural.

In November I felt the slap of reality. After hearing homosexuality lumped together with pedophilia and zoophilia (also known as bestiality) in a Bible study, I called a fellow missionary and cried on the phone to her. When we hung up and my host parents (who are also the congregation's pastors) asked if everything was okay, I decided to tell the truth—part of it, anyway. I told them that having homosexuality lumped in with pedophilia and zoophilia hurt. That it hurt because I have friends who are homosexual. This quickly escalated into a one-sided debate during which I was accused of being a “victim of the homosexual agenda.” Since then, my relationship with my host dad has never been as close as that with my host mom who, after the “conversation,” gave me a huge hug communicating the message that “even if we don't agree, I don't want this to ruin our relationship.”



Even with the hug from my host mom, that conversation was the worst one. Other conversations followed. I always cried in my room after them. Eventually I gave up the hope that I'd be able to tell the truth to someone here. I stopped thinking that it would ever be possible to tell someone that I'm not straight. That I'm queer.

I have come to love this village of people in ways that I have never before loved a community in which I've lived, yet these people have only come to love part of me. If my host dad ever found out, I have no doubt that I would be sent packing. And if I followed through on my promises and came here on my honeymoon after marrying a woman, would anyone even want to see me?

*Name withheld by request*



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## **“Change”**

I've worked at the ELCA churchwide office for many years. In that time I've experienced many forms of sexism.

Initially what I noticed was that only the men were invited to lunch with the director, and only the men were part of meetings when visitors or other important people came to our office. Another female colleague and I said something but it still took a few years before change occurred on that front.

I saw a lot of sexism in my unit, too, and raised the issue over and over again. Some things never changed, but over time some changes were made in what we did and how we did it. Slowly, our unit began to deal with women around this church as though they had authority and agency. Prior to this we didn't act as though they did. Eventually, that

change in behavior came back into our office and affected how we women were seen and treated, too. Now, years later, a lot really has changed. But it wasn't without pain and tears.

The unit director was pretty hard on me (and I wondered how much of that was because I spoke up regarding sexism) and I noticed that the standards for me were different than for those of my male counterpart (mine were set much higher!) and the pay differential was great. (His was higher, and the director assisted him to rewrite his job description to get an even higher pay rate.)

Despite all that, and with lots of hard work and commitment on my part, my director did continue to move me up into more challenging positions—including offering me one position never before held by a woman. But then one day I really hit a larger glass ceiling (It felt a bit more like cement, though.) when I tried for a higher position. My male counterpart also tried, even though it wasn't something he really was interested in doing. (He liked exactly what he was doing at the time.) We both interviewed. I was told I'd done very well in the interview and that the committee had been impressed. I was told I had the qualifications but that they'd chosen my colleague and that they'd get some management courses for him. Together, they said, we'd be a good team.

*Name withheld by request*



## **“Church Assemblies”**

It is not widely recognized, or believed, that it is not at all uncommon for women to be harassed at church meetings. I was at one such meeting, a large assembly, when a woman came forward about the physical sexual assault that she had experienced from another participant in the assembly. The

purpose of this story is not to describe in detail, but certainly to note, the forces that were at work to deal with it privately, to keep the wife of the perpetrator protected from this information, and to keep the matter from being public.

In a conversation with a church leader I said that women commonly experience sexual advances, touching, suggestive and inappropriate comments at church meetings. I then went on to say, “That is why, at any church meeting, you will find women crying in the bathroom.” He seemed most surprised by my last statement and said only, “No. It is not true. Women do not cry in the bathroom at church meetings.”

I sometimes wonder how many women have cried, alone or supported by other women, in the bathrooms of church meetings because of harassment and the confusing and shocking experience of sexism.

*Name withheld by request*



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## **“A Young, Asian Woman”**

I am a young, Asian woman. I stand at the intersection of race, age, class, and gender.

It’s often hard for me to pinpoint if my experiences are based solely on my race, my age, my class or my gender. More often than not, my experiences are a combination of them.

Here are two stories from my life.

I was getting ice cream sundaes with some coworkers at a McDonald’s in suburban Illinois during a crowded, lunch-time rush. We were waiting in line, laughing and sharing the latest news, when an elderly man, who looked like anyone’s grandpa in a nice golf polo shirt, fishing vest, and khakis

came very close to me. He stood at point blank range—just staring at me.

I whispered to one of my coworkers, “That man is staring at me.”

She didn’t have any idea what was going on and said in a loud, amused way, “Who? Who’s staring at you?” her eyebrows raised in intrigue.

The elderly man said, “Me. I’m staring at her,” in a matter of fact, it’s-none-of-your-business kind of way.

My coworker was startled, and I decided to make my escape to the women’s restroom. I bolted to the door, shut it behind me, locked it and waited a few minutes. When I was sure the man would have gone, I emerged, only to find him waiting outside the bathroom for me.

He got close to my face and said in a low, gravely voice, “I used to have pretty little things like you during the war all the time.” I was shocked. I had no idea what to say. We were in a public place, no one took notice, and I just walked away as quickly as I could, holding back humiliated tears.

Another time, I was walking through China Town in New York City with a group of colleagues. We had just come from a meeting. I was wearing my best dress, nylons, my lowest pair of heels (after all, we were walking quite a distance), make up, fake pearls, and matching fake pearl earrings. I had my *very professional* looking briefcase I had bought just for the trip, and my hair was pulled back into a low, *very professional* looking bun.

We stopped at a dollar vendor on the sidewalk. The man had one folding table with a hanging display and a few trinkets. As my friends perused the table, the man began making comments to me like, “Are all women like you really *submissive*

in bed? I bet you are. I bet you're just a *doll*."

Now, if you're unfamiliar with what it's like to be a young, Asian woman in the United States, the derogatory stereotypes span the spectrum from "submissive Asian flower," to "feisty Asian tigresses," to "Smart Asian, straight-A student who excels at piano, math, violin, and intricate art projects." I had had *enough!*

I pointed my well-polished finger at him, heated in the heart and head and said with all the courage of my conviction, "Sir, you cannot say that to me. It's not acceptable, and it's not okay with me!" And I clicked away in a rush. My friends gave me high fives for being "so assertive."

But here's the catch:


When I was insulted inside a nice, suburban McDonalds by a well-dressed, elderly white man, I ran away in fear, shock and humiliation.

When I was insulted by a dollar street vendor in China Town, who was poorly dressed, and, a fact I omitted purposefully in the story earlier, who was African American, I was able and confident to look down my finger, scold him, and turn on my heel in a huff.

These experiences of insult, prejudice, sexism and racism occurred because of *the intersection of who I am*. **A young, Asian woman.**

So also, my reaction to these experiences of insult, prejudice, sexism and racism occurred out of *the intersection of who I am*. **A young, Asian woman.**

*Name withheld by request*



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## “Tenure”

I am a professor at a Lutheran university. I love my work. I enjoy my colleagues.

A couple of years ago some uncomfortable silence made me realize something.

I was in a faculty meeting where we were discussing a philosophical concept—I don’t even remember what it was exactly—and I tried to explain an aspect of it through my own experience. I referred to being on my hands and knees late at night, scraping smashed raisins off the floor with a knife.

But then my male colleagues’ blank stares told me that none of them had ever cleaned a floor before. I was startled to realize that my path to tenure had been radically different from theirs. I had traveled through a path of two babies and smashed raisins on the floor.

*Name withheld by request*



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## “My Painful Visitations”

I am an African American pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). At times I have had the opportunity to worship in ELCA congregations where I am the only person of color, usually when I am on vacation somewhere. Of course, being on vacation, I do not walk in with my collar on, so folks in the pew do not know if I have just moved into the community, if I am visiting, if I am on vacation, or if I am just looking for a church home. They do not know my economic status, educational background, profession, or my hopes and dreams, but they do know one thing that is obvious: I am African American.

On more than one occasion when I have gone into these churches, people stare at me and my first thought is that they want to say to me, “I think you made a wrong turn,” because they look like they are very surprised to see me and wonder how I arrived there. At some of the churches, I experienced subtle hostility: people avoided making eye contact with me and they avoided passing the peace with me.

The most painful, though, has been when I have sat down in the pew and women have moved their purses to the other side of them very hurriedly as if they are afraid I might just run away with it.

I have experienced racism all my life, but the most painful is when it happens in a church. I know we are all sinners in need of forgiveness, but I am waiting for Lutheran congregation members to make a point to make a person who is “different” from the norm of the congregation feel welcome. At times, not one person in one of these congregations greeted me with any degree of Christian love.

In *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, we find a prayer for social justice: “Grant, O God, that your holy and life-giving Spirit may move every human heart; that the barriers dividing us may crumble, suspicions disappear, and hatreds cease; and that, with our divisions healed, we might live in justice and peace; through your Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”

Whether male or female, African American, American Indian, Asian, Latino, or white, we belong to the body of Christ.

*Name withheld by request*



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## **“Can you hear me now?”**

Not only am I a woman, I am a woman under the age of 30. Being a young woman makes my experiences at work more complex. Many times I have presented ideas and suggestions to a group, and they are immediately dismissed by everyone present. However, when a male in my age group or a female in an age group that is “respected” shares the same idea later in the meeting, it is suddenly accepted by the group.

Each time this happens I immediately question and blame myself, asking, “Did I not communicate my idea in a way that was comprehensible? Did I overstep my boundaries by offering that suggestion? Were they just too absorbed in their own thoughts to fully listen to mine? And if so, how could I have gotten their full attention?”

*Name withheld by request*



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## **“Talking It Over”**

I have changed positions several times in my years of church work. And taking a new position always means changes in my schedule, hours or workload.

When discussing these career moves with various supervisors, I have often been asked, “Have you talked to your husband about this?”

(I was asked the same question when I resigned from my secular employer in order to work for the church.)

After the third or fourth time, I got angry because I assume that what they were really wondering is, “Does your



husband know you're doing this, and does he approve?"

Recently, I told my husband what I'd experienced.

He replied, "Well, of course, they expect you to talk things over with me. I'm your husband. We make decisions together."

"I don't think that was the implication."

"Why?"

"In the four times that you've changed jobs since we've been married, has anyone ever asked YOU if you've talked things over with ME?"

His silence told me exactly what I suspected. He'd never been asked if he discussed his career moves with his wife.

I can't help but wonder if the men who asked me doubted my ability to make my own decisions, or if they were just looking out for their fellow man. After all, if I work too hard, I might not feel up to cooking dinner and cleaning house at the end of the day.

*Name withheld by request*



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## **"Power, Silence and Sexism"**

How do power, silence and sexism intersect in my life? Here's my story.

I am a young woman with a deep love and personal investment in this church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). My story is not so different from many other young women that I know. I was baptized and raised Lutheran. I have always been involved in my home congregation and have been raised up in organizations of

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this church throughout my life and, now, I am attending a Lutheran college.

As with many journeys, especially roads that we travel and hold close to our hearts, my travels and experiences in this church have the highest highs and some of the lowest lows of my relatively short life. I will tell you of a low, and, sadly, like my growing up, this story is also not so different from many other young women of the ELCA whom I know.

I was at a church-related event for youth and young adults during my senior year in high school. Like many of these events, all the participants stayed in a hotel, and, like many of these events, there were very strict rules to be followed in regard to room arrangements and curfews.

I was simply hanging out in my room with a group of my trusted friends, watching a movie on television. I dozed off during the movie, as I often do. I woke up to an unwelcome, unsolicited sexual gesture and was sexually assaulted in my own hotel bed. He left my room afterward, and I have never felt so alone in my life.

You might be saying to yourself, “Why didn’t she say no?” “Why didn’t she fight back or call for help?” “Why didn’t she know or take precaution?” Let me assure you—I ask myself that nearly every time I think about this experience. It wasn’t that I didn’t know the precautions or the procedures. I can only tell you that in the situation, I felt powerless, helpless, voiceless and paralyzed.

For me, that’s where the irony of silence screams its triumph from the deepest part of my heart. For me, the actual, initial experience pales in comparison to the after effects. I have not shared this experience outside of a **very** small, select group.

However, that being said, one specific person that I did tell was someone who, I thought, would have and should have had power to “do” something, but nothing was done. I have not even shared this experience with my family because of their involvement in the church and their knowledge of and respect for the young man involved. Largely, I carry this alone.

I share this story with some fear that the reaction will be something insignificant and obtuse like stricter youth event rules or a reprimand for those “in charge” at the time. In reality, those “actions” will do nothing to change the fact and daily reality that I cannot share my experience, especially in my church, because, ultimately, I feel guilt and responsibility for what happened to me. For that to change, a significant shift in the paradigm of how we are taught to think about sexual abuse as young women would need to occur and be widely accepted.

I am passionate about my church, and to this point that has been the reason I have not shared this story—out of fear of harming the good work that is being done that I care so deeply about. However, I have chosen to share my story today and am fueled by the same passion that has kept me silent for this time. I have chosen to re-confirm my faith in this church and am proud to serve and struggle through this journey with those working to change the paradigms that persist.

*Name withheld by request*



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### **“Who Says?”**

I am Bishop Jessica Crist.

I was a bright student in confirmation class. The somewhat young and liberal assistant pastor—at least, compared to the

senior pastor—was going through a list of possible careers in the church, asking which appealed to us.

When he described “pastor,” I raised my hand. It seemed to fit better than any of the others. He was clearly taken aback. He wasn’t expecting this. He sputtered and stammered, and eventually spit out, “But you can’t. Our church doesn’t ordain women.”

So I decided then and there, as a seventh grader, that I knew what I wanted to be.

I was turned down for a call in a congregation I knew well because I was a woman. The bishop had recommended me. The call committee had recommended me.

But the language the congregation used was, “The congregation will vote on whether or not to call...” I found that telling. Instead of “The congregation will vote to call,” the very language gave an out.

Everything went well until the weekend of the vote. There was a whispering campaign, a telephone campaign, and I was voted down. “I just can’t imagine a woman doing my funeral.” “What if her children need her?” “Can she be a wife and a pastor at the same time?”

I was astounded that these concerns were still being articulated 25 years after this church decided to ordain women.

And I was disappointed that they couldn’t address these things directly, only through the back door.

When I went with an ELCA group on an ecumenical journey in 2006, I felt as if I were in a time warp. My very presence was a compromise. In a previous such journey a female bishop was snubbed by the Vatican, and no female bishops had been part of the journey since that time. (Our group had four male bishops and two female assistants to bishops.)

I accepted the invitation to be part of the journey not knowing the dynamic or the history. We went from Geneva to Istanbul to Rome to London. Geneva was bureaucratic, egalitarian and institutional. Istanbul was another world. Turkish secularism mandated that none of us wear clerical garb in public. Within the Phanar (an Orthodox version of the Vatican), two of us were allowed to wear clerical garb. The rest were instructed not to. The Orthodox hierarchy was very gracious and sidestepped easily the whole issue of women's ordination. They seemed profoundly uncomfortable with women, lay or clergy, and referred to all the women in our group (lay and ordained) as "Mrs. Kathy."

In Rome all clergy were instructed to wear clerical garb, and we did. We two women were the recipients of double-takes, scorn, disbelief and adoration. People wanted to talk with us, touch us, stay away from us. In a city that swarms with black-clad priests, two priestly women were an anomaly. Nuns cheered us on.

When our delegation was being shown our seats in a special section for the ceremony instating new cardinals, a guard became frantic when he saw two women in the clergy section. He kept motioning us toward the nuns, shrieking in Italian. It took the intervention of one of our bishops to keep us there.

London was perhaps the most disappointing. I expected better of these brothers in Christ who are so close to us. The condescending, dismissive attitude toward the Episcopal Church in the United States, not only for having a gay bishop, but for having female bishops, was disheartening. There were other snubs and disappointments there, too.

In 2007 I was elected Bishop of the Montana Synod, the first woman to serve as an ELCA Bishop in the West (Regions 1 and 2). Gender, it appeared, was not an issue in the election.



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## **“Your Lovely Family”**

I came to the decision to seek ordination after a long, thoughtful and prayerful process. It was, for various reasons, a significant step for me, and I expected, and needed words of support, encouragement and affirmation. I had had broad experience in leadership in the church and knew that others believed I would make a fine pastor. When I made an appointment to tell my bishop, who was also a good family friend and was aware of some of the aspects of my discernment, the first thing he said was: “Oh, and what is going to happen to that beautiful family of yours?”

*Name withheld by request*



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## **“Subtle but Clear”**

A mid-level manager comes in every morning and walks down to get coffee, surreptitiously noting the time of arrival and attendance of subordinate female staff, but he rarely speaks to them then. Female employees note that the mid-level manager clearly acknowledges men by saying “Good morning” or some other social greeting to them—but only speaks to the female employees if he needs a response to his work request. When speaking with male or female employees who have a higher level of authority or outside visitors in authority, he is noted to be polite and eager to learn more about them. When speaking with female staff with less formal authority than he, he is consistently condescending and often questions their competence and intellect. He does not show these behaviors when his superiors are present.

*Name withheld by request*



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## “Women’s Things”

I am Bonnie Pene. I am a second career seminarian. Several other second career colleagues and I created a composite sketch of one woman’s ministry from our collective experiences on internship for class discussion. Our character is Susan, but everything in her story happened to one of us.

Susan is three months into her first call in a mid-sized congregation with multiple full-time staff members. She is the first female pastor in this congregation.

The call process went well with only a few “odd” questions from the call committee, like “What does your husband think of you being a pastor?” or “Does he just follow you around from place to place?” and “Will you take time out of the office when your kids are sick?” But she has generally felt very welcomed by the congregation and the staff.

However, there have also been comments from parishioners. For instance, “Why isn’t she in children’s ministry?” “Why does she wear skirts and not pants ‘like a real pastor?’” In an adult forum a man who took offense at something she said, shook his finger at her and said that it wasn’t too long ago that women weren’t allowed to teach men. She also was told that she preaches pretty good “for a woman.”

Perhaps more disturbing has been the sexism she feels among the pastoral staff. One morning another associate pastor came into Susan’s office with his cup of coffee, sat down and said that he wanted to tell her how happy he was to have the opportunity to work with her. He said that he had never really been around female pastors much. . . . However, he said that he had been on a committee once with three female pastors and “They were REALLY smart!”

“Imagine that,” thought Susan. But she remained quiet.

The other pastor went on to say, “AND, they were really WOO-WOO!” making an hour-glass sign with his hands, and raising his eyebrows up and down. “I thought they could come and preach in my pulpit ANYTIME, if you know what I mean.” He laughed.

Susan said she was busy and really didn’t have time to talk and ushered him out the door.

On his way out, he turned and said, “Oh, by the way, could you go to the hospital today to visit Mrs. Jones? She has been there for a few days after some breast cancer lump removal thing, and her husband, Bob, called me about it yesterday. He’s upset because the doctor is recommending removing the whole breast. But Bob wants us to talk to the Mrs. about waiting and getting a second opinion, before doing something so radical. I told him I’d send you to talk to her, since that’s more you girls’ kind of talk. You know, see if you can calm her down and talk some sense into her.”

She later went to the lead pastor and said she was concerned about the subtle and not-so subtle sexism she was experiencing. She related some of the comments made by parishioners and what she had observed at the monthly pastors’ conference meetings, and emphasized her professional displeasure over her pastoral colleague’s comments about other female clergy.

The lead pastor seemed surprised by all this. He did not think there were any sexist feelings in the congregation or from the other associate pastor, and that Susan was being too sensitive and thin-skinned. She needed to stop being so moody and learn how to take a joke. Nothing was meant by these comments and they were just kidding.





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## **“Disbelief”**

I am Jim Pene. I do not work in the church, but I do believe what you are hearing.

You see, I have been on my synod’s gender justice task force for the last two years, serving with a woman as co-chair. I have been part of a study, collecting data and hearing stories. I have been a witness. I am working to break the silence about sexism in this church.

My spouse is in seminary, and I was able to attend one of her classes for a group presentation on case studies of women in ministry. I guess I shouldn’t be surprised, but there were a number of men in the class who didn’t believe that the experiences reported to the class actually happened.

Fortunately, after all the discussion, led by a team of a woman and a man, I think the entire class realized that these things are happening to women, and I think they took to heart that everyone needs to work together to change.



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## **“One in Three”**

I was spending the summer in Mexico studying Spanish. I had opted to stay with a Mexican family who opened their home to me as I learned this new language. A nephew of the family was a medical student. We had become friends and he invited me to join him on a number of social outings.

Late one afternoon he came to pick me up to go out for the evening. He seemed rushed and anxious. When I came out to the car, I was surprised to see another man in the front seat, and in the back a young, indigenous woman, vis-

ibly pregnant and in great discomfort. My friend hurried me into the back seat with the woman and as we drove I listened to the nervous conversation of the men. I soon began to comprehend the situation: the young woman had traveled to the city to find work in the home of the man. She was pregnant (she had been abused by him, but that was not the language he used when talking to my friend), and now she was in labor. When she came to him in desperation, he had panicked and called his friend who had medical training. Now, absurdly, we four were on our way to a hospital.

As we drove too fast through the streets, I comforted her as I could and prayed we would arrive in time. How relieved I was when we drove up to the emergency door of a large, modern hospital, its lights shining brightly through the doorway. The two men leapt out, leaving me with a terrified woman, herself no more than a child, deep into the pain and trauma of childbirth.

The men returned, got into the car grim-faced, and we headed away from the hospital. What was going on? It took some time before I understood what I could not believe: the girl had been turned away because she is poor; and the men I was with, who could well afford to, did not consider, or pay, to have her treated.

We drove for what seemed like forever. By now it was dark, the sky heavy with rain. The ride had to be terrifying and deeply uncomfortable for this shuddering body beside me in her self-absorbed concentration. I was not sure she even knew I was there—or whether she felt my presence offering what comfort I could. Advice was useless—what did I, myself a teenager, know about birthing babies?

We bumped through what looked and felt like a muddy field, lurching crudely to a stop. The two men ran through

the mud to a long, low building made of wood, light seeping out through the cracks between the slats of wood. It was a clinic. I suppose they had gone for medical help. They never said.

As for me and the girl: I opened the car door and she hung her legs out the opening, her birthing fluid mingling with the rain. I knelt down, knee deep in mud, and the baby slithered into my shaking hands.

I never did learn what happened to the mother, and to the baby, a girl.

Globally, at least one in three women and girls is beaten or sexually abused in their lifetime.

*Name withheld by request*



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## **“You Are Not With This Group”**

I was invited by a Lutheran state public policy office to visit a correction institution for women. The director of the public policy office had heard some concerns about the condition of the institution and was invited by the corrections director to come to listen to the incarcerated women’s concerns. The public policy director invited both Lutheran and ecumenical women, 25 in all.

The institution is located about 70 miles from a major city in a very remote and desolate area. It was my first time visiting such a facility. When I arrived, the guard checked my name off the pre-registered list. I had left my purse and other valuables in the car. All I had was my driver’s license, which I gave to the prison guard before I entered the reception room.

After everyone had arrived, we were sent to a small reception room. We were all sitting in a circle. As I looked around

the room, I saw I was the one, lone African American woman in the group. I knew some of the women, who were from ecumenical social organizations and ELCA synod offices. The convener for the group asked that each woman give her name and tell us the reason why she chose to come.

When it was my turn, and before I could speak, the convener immediately said in a strong, terse voice, “OH, YOU ARE NOT WITH THIS GROUP!” My colleague who was sitting next to me said in an even stronger voice, “OH, YES, SHE IS!”

The convener became very apologetic. She looked like the cat that swallowed the canary!

“She thinks I don’t belong,” was all I could think. She thinks I am here as an inmate or coming to see someone who is incarcerated. I was already feeling apprehensive about going and having to give up my driver’s license to the guard. I was hurt. I was made to feel that I did not belong to this group of “Christian” women even though I have been a leader in this church for a number of years.

*Name withheld by request*



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## **“The Power of a Batterer”**

I have experienced pain and suffering in a congregation that I loved very much. The pain can best be described as if someone very close to me died a violent death and there was nothing I could do but watch. That’s how I would explain my feelings and experience.

I was glad to see a pastor from my own ethnic community come to my congregation. Since we were a culturally diverse congregation, I knew there would be many challenges ahead

for the entire church community. We held an anti-racism training so we could begin to unmask and address the racism in our congregation. There were those who felt it did not apply to them; those who left angry; and those who recognized that they had been offensive and wanted to reconcile. It was hard, but I felt we were beginning to make strides as a congregation and to bridge the gaps that had separated us for so long. I was very active with the women's group of my ethnic community. There were many women in the church with leadership skills, gifts and talents. We came together to support each other, learn and grow in faith. We held Bible studies, retreats, and celebrated International Women's Month, on one occasion telling the stories of women in the Bible through our eyes and ears. Being in a church where women were bold and assertive was not only empowering, it nurtured our faith as we saw how God called us to use our creativity and spiritual power.

The new pastor befriended a group of congregational members, mainly women; it became a clique of individuals the pastor had targeted as leaders and as friends. As time went on the pastor began to talk to me about individuals in the congregation. At first I thought he was sharing with me out of concern, but then I began to notice that the people he was talking about were mostly women—women who did not agree with him. He began to create doubts about people in leadership positions— or anyone who would threaten his position—by questioning their motives, discrediting their capabilities, spreading rumors.

As we planned the annual women's retreat, he wanted to know and have a say in who the guest speaker would be, implying that the speaker who was recommended from a different denomination was suspect. I realized that the pastor was undermining the women's group. He made it seem that we were incapable of making our decisions as we had in the

past. His tactics were subtle and confusing. Looking back it is clear that innuendo, secrecy and rumor were his tools, but at the time it was hard to decipher. I received a call from one of the deacons, who was also the co-chair of the women's group, stating the pastor told her to be careful of me—that I wanted to have power in the church and that I had been talking about her. It is more than ironic that he would say this, especially after I had shared with him an article by Lutheran professor Martha Stortz on “Naming and Renaming Power.”

There was tension building with the pastor and those he had targeted as being divisive. He targeted female leaders in the church or anyone who was not in agreement with him by publicly accusing them of being divisive, having anger issues, or harboring ill intent toward the congregation. So much has happened that I have not shared. It has not been easy to write about this betrayal—to make sense of his behavior and the way he used and abused his power. It is impossible not to see that he behaved like a batterer: wanting total power and control, using intimidation and deception to create doubt and confusion in people's minds, undermining the decisions some of the women made, belittling people behind their backs and creating an atmosphere of division and enmity among women who for so long had worked together. Many of us were stunned that a pastor who was called to be a shepherd brought such fear and anger instead of reconciliation. Those who could have held him accountable are no longer active. Instead, we are trying to stay spiritually safe. Many of the female leaders left the congregation, are in other congregations and are moving forward. I am visiting a church and hope to find a home church that is nurturing and spiritually safe.

*Name withheld by request*



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## **“Dear Bishop”**

Dear Bishop,

I have been a member of my congregation for over 20 years. Throughout the years, I have seen the congregation through some wonderful times and some bad times, as is with most congregations, I suppose. But I never resorted to writing a letter of complaint until now.

I was thrilled the day we decided to call a pastor from my ethnic community. I myself was a part of that call committee. What high hopes we all had!

This is why it breaks my heart now to see what is happening here. Our pastor’s behavior is such that I feel compelled to write this letter.

When my daughter asked him to carry through with something he had promised, he went on the attack, which is what he does whenever a member questions his authority. I was shocked to see his response to my daughter.

He lied and manipulated their conversations until my daughter, defeated and dejected, left the congregation. I have dedicated many years of volunteer service for my congregation. To have a family member treated this way was painful for me.

But what has really upset me most is how he has broken the confidentiality that as a pastor he is supposed to keep with his parishioners. Many times while speaking over the telephone with him, he would divulge intimate details of other congregation members to me. I actually had to say to him, “I don’t need to know that.”

One afternoon not too long ago I had lunch with seven women from the congregation. Our conversation naturally led to the pastor. Most of us were by now aware of his odd behavior.

I cannot tell you how horrified we were when we realized that he had talked about each of us at the table. And we had all heard the same gossip about other parishioners from him. We looked around the table and could read each others' thoughts: What had he said about me? What had I confided in him?


I feel that he takes advantage of the women of the congregation by taking them into his confidence, getting them to open to him, and then using that information against them when the time is right. Many of these are women who are vulnerable to begin with.

I find it difficult to sit in church hearing him preach the word of God. He even uses the pulpit to attack people who he believes are against him. He is destroying what the founding members of my ethnic community started years ago.

A copy of this letter has been sent to the congregation council president.

I thank you for taking time to read this. Please keep us in your prayers.

God Bless,  
A Sister in Christ



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**“My Body”**

A few hundred of us traveled by bus from Milwaukee to Washington, D.C., for a march on the Capitol to advocate for



fair housing. Throngs of people coursed through the grounds outside the Capitol. Our march was a sea of people in the hot October sun. At one point, we came to a standstill and waited for everyone ahead of us to move on. In the press of bodies, it took a minute for me to realize that a man was sexually molesting me from behind. I turned and looked at him square in the eye. He was short. He pretended not to know what he was doing. I put my housemate who had traveled with me between us. The man did not want to sexually molest him, a tall, muscular man.

Then, a few months later, as winter settled in on my first job out of college—in a Lutheran-related program, one of the volunteers at the organization where I was working started to whisper things to me during meetings or say things to me in the corridors. I tried to be polite and pretend that I thought what he said was funny. When I finally told my supervisor, he referred me to the female director so that she could solve the problem. I was embarrassed to say exactly what this man had whispered to me. She made me tell her. I thought she was going to have the volunteer's head on a platter. Only then did I realize that others thought it was okay for me to be upset about being sexually harassed.

In the spring of that year, a huge chunk of concrete came sailing through my bedroom window in the middle of the night of April Fool's Day. My first terror-filled thought as blood rushed into my ears was that a rapist was going to follow the rock into the room. My two male housemates burst into my bedroom, one bearing his baseball bat. It was punks in the alley, having fun. I couldn't sleep. I had to ask one of my housemates to sleep in the living room with me because I was afraid that a rock would come through the front window once I moved there to sleep.

*Name withheld by request*



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## “Pastor’s Wife”

I was grateful for the request for stories. Over the last several decades, there have been many changes in women’s roles and leadership in the church. Women now receive respect for their knowledge and expertise and are able to serve in leadership positions throughout this church. Perhaps most significantly, women have been accepted for ordination. Yet there is a specific group of women in this church that remains under destructive oppression. This group of women is presently unidentified and the oppression that is endured is not yet named. Because it is unnamed, it is not included in conversations surrounding issues of oppression, yet these pervasive issues are extremely significant, real and important for the health of these women and ultimately for the health of this church. This oppressed group is made up of women who happen to be married to male clergy and most commonly are known by the unsolicited title, “the pastor’s wife.” I am one of them.

We have been defined and objectified. We are expected to fit the prescribed roles given to us and to meet many, often conflicting, expectations surrounding these roles. The presence of these difficult situations is not unique to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. A study among “pastors’ wives” in South Africa revealed three common themes: anger, loss of identity, and dysfunction within the family.<sup>7</sup> We are often viewed as appendages to our husbands and have struggles resulting from the loss of autonomy and the denial of freedom to exercise self-direction. Some of the ways “pastors’

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<sup>7</sup> See Sarah Jane Wessels, “Care for the Pastor’s Wife, Too!” in *Ministry Health* (No. 219): 1998. Retrieved from [http://www.ministryhealth.net/mb\\_articles/219\\_sv\\_care\\_pastors\\_wife.html](http://www.ministryhealth.net/mb_articles/219_sv_care_pastors_wife.html).

wives” are kept in line is through gossip, increased pressure to conform, use of “power over” dynamics, negative reviews regarding the husband’s performance, and even termination of the husband’s call.

Here’s what happened to me. During the interview processes for calls, I have been expected to accompany my husband. At one location, I was requested to be at three separate interviews—first with the call committee, then with the staff and council, and finally at a “meet and greet” for the entire congregation. These meetings were all prior to a vote on issuing him a call and hiring him as their pastor. If I had not cooperated with this process, it is probable that he would not have been called due to parishioners’ reservations about not having “a feel” for whether or not the pastor’s wife would be an appropriate candidate for the unofficial position of “pastor’s wife.” It is my understanding that synodical offices endorse this process and the dynamics inherent in it through recommendations to congregations about the interview process for pastors.

The dynamics at play in this interview process lead congregations to assume that the female spouse of the pastor is coming as part of a package deal that is being purchased. In another congregation, it was made known that the parishioners “couldn’t wait to get my husband and his sweet little family.” This statement, while made innocently enough and without malice, highlights a problematic entitlement on the part of some that they have the right to own the spouse and children of the pastor.

At one congregation, after the reception for the installation of my husband, one of the council members approached me and delivered the message that “you will be here next Sunday.” In my mind, clarification regarding who was and who was not being called as the pastor was needed.

Another time, my husband was taken out to lunch by influential members of the congregation for the purpose of “wanting him to be successful.” These members asked about me, referring to their sense that my level of involvement at the church was inadequate. It was within this context that my husband was directly asked, “Is there something wrong in your marriage?”

He was updated with reports that there were rumblings of discontent in the congregation because I wasn’t there enough and that some felt “cheated” because they didn’t know me. The issue of ownership of the spouse of the pastor was explicitly verbalized. Unwritten expectations and mandates regarding the behavior of the spouse were communicated. I felt suffocated.

The assumption by some that I did not like them was not alleviated by explanation of my life circumstances at the time. The setting of my priorities at the time had to do with the presence of situations in my life requiring attention. I was in the midst of several extended family crises, attending graduate school, working at my own career, and offering guidance to my young adult daughters as they were navigating transitions in their own lives. It is interesting that even while I write this, I am aware that I feel a necessity to give explanations about how I was prioritizing my time and to provide justification for my choices. This motivation may be in response to a learned fear of judgment.

Other professions do not tolerate employment requirements and evaluations that inherently define success by spousal involvement, beginning with the interview process and carrying on throughout the tenure of the spouse’s position. Yet in the church it is tolerated, even endorsed, not only at the local congregational level, but also among other areas of leadership in the church. Requests for assistance in navigating

these situations from upper leadership in the church are often ignored. I called on them for help. However, I did not feel heard; rather, I sensed a pressure for compliance to the objectification I was experiencing—and this was in conversation with a woman. I was left with the understanding that if only I would cooperate and comply with the defined role expectations, this problem would go away. I felt as if the priority was to spare a congregation the inevitable conflict that surrounds change. The result is that the church remains unchallenged to identify and change unhealthy ways of existing.

The message that is given is that there is something wrong with the women struggling under these gender-based assumptions and that these women do not have the right to be self-directive and to have choices about their lives, but should willingly, even cheerfully, tolerate intrusions into personal affairs. The resulting sense of being owned by others seems to be endorsed by the church as a normal, acceptable way of life.

*Name withheld by request*



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### **“What do the ‘lady pastors’ wear?”**

Recently I was asked if my name could be forwarded as a candidate for the bishop’s office. My country had not seen a female bishop yet and was in the midst of a serious backlash against female clergy after over 20 years of women’s ordination. There were various conversations hosted where, it seemed, the female candidates’ looks were under fire as much or even more than their theological acumen. The invitation gave me an opportunity to reflect on my experiences as a woman in the global Lutheran church. I speak now from a privileged position of certain authority, one that has not come without significant hardship and struggle against blatant

and implicit patronizing attempts to keep the “young lady” with a “cute accent” in “her place.” I will focus here on one particular memory: the dress code for “lady pastors” in my home country.

Growing up as a girl, I most definitely never thought of becoming a pastor or a professor. Both were male domains. I did not know any female pastors or theologians. To say one aspired to be either one sounded about as realistic as expressing one’s desire to become an astronaut or a time-traveler. Besides, our high voices and bodies seemed ill-appropriate to the tasks. Breast, periods, and pregnancies posed a real problem. By-and-large, women were not groomed as thinkers. We had no models of female professors, really. There were plenty of female teachers in high school, which seemed to be the high-end for female teachers. Then women’s ordination became possible, suddenly, during my last year of theological training, and I, along with many a sister, went with the stream, existentially surprised by the turn of events. We boldly stepped along as called by our church, without too much thought to the question, “What do I bring to the table?” It was all about inclusion, being allowed “in.” I was ordained in 1989, one year after the ordinations of the first women.

At the beginning of women’s ordination in my country, many unresolved issues came together in one tangible issue: What clerical outfit would the ladies wear? What kind of pantyhose would “lady pastors” wear? What size earrings? How about hair? The official uniform designed for female clergy came from top designers, but the guidelines came from a small committee put together by who knows who. (A woman or two might have been part of it.)

The resulting outfit was—sturdy and intimidating. It was dark and thick; it would cover every curve of femininity—and any sign of possible pregnancy, and thus, sexual activity. Or, as

one sales person said, “The elastic band helps with the coffee bloat.” The dress worked in that regard: I was eight months pregnant and preaching, and people could not tell for sure what was under the pastor’s cross.

To paint the picture: The outfit came with a beautiful cross that resembled the bishop’s cross. A mandatory undershirt, made of lace and silk, added a “feminine” touch, but, importantly, remained unseen underneath. That was and still is the piece I cherish. Otherwise the suit made me feel like Joan of Arc ready for a battle. We were warned: One was not to wear the men’s outfit, or any part of it, under any circumstances. Of course, many of us immediately disobeyed that rule, hoping not to get caught wearing the male pastor’s shirt. The first of us to be denied the purchase of a clerical shirt due to her sex acquired lots of black silk and had a tailor make her a set. The rest of us went around our own church’s protocols and bought male clergy shirts from far away, like Rome, lying, if needed, that the shirts were for our brothers.

We were to be the “lady pastors”—something different from “regular” clergy. The outfit, just as the colloquial title “lady pastor,” was to signal this crystal clear. The suit made it clear to the freshly-ordained pastor that she was, and was to be, *different*. The outfit certainly helped us to feel odd and look out of place. Starting with the novel outfit, a female pastor would often have to repeat the story of her office (for example, by answering questions such as “Are you a flight attendant? Or a deaconess?”), her ordination (“Are you really a priest?”), her role (“You really can baptize/marry/bury...?”), and her dress (“What is it that you are wearing?”) to the many people whose eyes were glued on the impressive but symbolically unknown outfit. After they got over the outfit, they then realized they were in the presence of an alien, curious creature: a female pastor.

Once ordained, I continued to encounter sexism, often masked and implicit but tangible. We “lady pastors” were included officially, yes, but we were conceived as problematic if we had questions that would rock the boat, as we were not expected to lead or bring along anything new. We were expected to jump into the boots of male pastors, quite literally, and often the boots did not fit. Either the woman trying to stumble along with them would fall, or new shoes had to be found. We were not allowed to wear the men’s clerical clothes, yet we were expected to “walk” the way the male clergy did.

I am beginning to feel my age, especially as the outfit is now being re-designed—after 20 years of lobbying from those who were to wear it day in and day out—and I find myself smiling inwardly when younger women boldly state their experience of “no sexism in the church” where it “makes no difference” if one is a woman. I smile, and I think of my lady pastor outfit—proof that being a woman does matter a great deal! Sometimes the male-designed cloak does not fit. It will take a long, long time, much longer than we have had so far, to be able to hand over a cloak that has the curves of women.

Real change is just under way, as women are actually leading, becoming bishops in numbers, filling faculty positions, and, most importantly, developing a new theological dialect with emphasis that has a “real feminine touch,” and that has not that much to do with the undershirt.

*Name withheld by request*



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## **“A Call and Calling”**

I picked up the phone in the church office, identifying myself as the pastor. The woman was calling about vacation Bible school, which we were hosting the following week. She



asked if I would be involved in the vacation Bible school as the pastor.

“Yes,” I responded, telling her I would teach the Bible story center to all the children, something I thoroughly enjoyed. She then very politely told me that she didn’t believe in that. I wasn’t sure what the “that” was—the fact that I was a female pastor, that I as a female pastor would be teaching children the Bible, that I would as a female pastor be teaching the Bible to anyone. She would not be sending her children to our vacation Bible school. With that, she hung up.

That conversation brought to mind all the other ways in which I continue to experience sexism in the church, most more subtle but in some ways more painful because they are not acknowledged. I remember a congregational member who questioned my ability to supervise the staff of the church’s preschool because I was too “soft” or the council president who suggested that the issues I had with a staff member was a “personality conflict between two headstrong women.”

I remembered all the times in which someone had made a comment about how I was dressed, whether a skirt that hit me at the knees was too short because “it enticed men with your shapely legs” or individuals commenting on my hair style as they shook my hand leaving worship. Would they make those comments to a male pastor?

In times too many to count or even remember, I have felt marginalized and my leadership ability questioned, not because I don’t have the experience but because I have a different style that doesn’t fit the “good old boys’ system.” But I haven’t even felt safe to say that there is a “good old boys’ system.” It is just my imagination, my own emotional perceptions, my problem.

Once when I expressed some of my struggles and questions in parish ministry at a woman's leadership conference, the bishop in attendance made the comment, "I'm glad I'm not your bishop." The clear message was that my experiences were my problem. There was nothing wrong with the system. The problem was me.

When I graduated from seminary 25 years ago, there were five women in a class of 50. I was the first woman some had heard from the pulpit. I was asked if the weddings I performed were legitimate, bluntly told that women should not be doing what I was doing, and that I should go back and read the Bible. Oh, and usually told not to take it personally.

But it feels very personal and it continues to hurt. As a female pastor I have found the mobility process more difficult, not been given the same accord and respect as male colleagues, and had my experience of sexism dismissed and diminished. I understand why all those years ago, my mother had her concerns about my vocation. She thought it would be a tough vocation for me because I'm a woman. She was right.

*Name withheld by request*



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## **“A dream denied”**

I am an ordained minister in the ELCA in a specialized teaching ministry. My first language is Spanish. I have been in the U.S. for 45 years. I speak English fluently. Years ago, I responded to God's call to become ordained in this church. I left my career and entered seminary, knowing that God had called me to serve the church as a pastor.

I was in a pretty diverse and open-minded synod, so I never even doubted that I would get a call. But after gradua-

tion, I waited. And waited. And waited. No call came from a congregation, not even an interview. I am Latina. I am a woman. Congregations did not want to see me as a pastor. That was fifteen years ago. I was never called to a congregation.

A dream denied.

*Name withheld by request*



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## **“Polite Patriarchy”**

Near the end of my graduate program in religion, I moved with my family from the large city where my graduate school was located to a small, nearby suburb. My family—my husband, young daughter, baby son, and I—immediately visited the ELCA congregation nearest us and began worshipping. We had left a small, vibrant congregation in the city and were pleased to find a large, well-established congregation near our new home.

I was dismayed, however, to find that my hope that I might be welcomed as a person knowledgeable about religion, and perhaps invited to read, to lead an occasional adult forum, or to participate in other ways that might make use of my theological training, was naïve. Instead I was encouraged to sign up for nursery duty, which was shared among the mothers of young children, while my husband was tapped to be an usher and a reader during the services. I inquired why a thriving, relatively affluent congregation had never hired a nursery attendant; I received blank stares in response. The best I was able to do was insist on mandatory background checks for anyone supervising young children, a policy that was quite novel to the congregation.

When I read a notice in the bulletin inviting young families to parenting classes using materials designed by James

Dobson, founder of Focus on the Family, I composed an e-mail telling the pastor that while ordinarily I would love to participate, I would not be joining him.

My e-mail included the painful disclosure that my mother had turned to Dobson's books and radio show when I was a young and "strong-willed" child. On Dobson's advice, she routinely hit me with a stick (a wooden cooking spoon, so a fancy stick, but still a stick). I love my mother, and I told my pastor this, but she had hurt me so deeply, and I considered Dobson's advice to parents so abusive and so harmful to our relationship that I simply could not, in good conscience, attend the classes. I don't hit my own children, I told him, and while I trust you mean well, I won't be there. I asked if we could talk.

What happened was that he never spoke to me again, although it was clear from his change in demeanor that he'd received and read my e-mail. I was shocked, although I should have figured out much earlier that this is what patriarchy looks like in the polite suburbs: Do not recognize women's "unwomanly" talents. Minimize any possible claim they might have to authority or power. Make sure they know women are supposed to unquestioningly serve. Never, ever take seriously any critique they might have of the patriarchs who influence you more than Jesus does. Don't love or respect the little children whom Jesus taught us to cherish; instead teach their parents to beat them, to ensure your continued authority. Never apologize; never cede your ground. With luck, the most troublesome women will go away—as, of course, I did.

*Name withheld by request*



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## “Headship”

I am grateful to be asked about my experiences of sexism in the church. I became a member of the ELCA mostly due to my experiences of sexism at a former church. At the former church, male headship was the “hobby teaching” of the pastor, meaning he always had something to say about it. The church leadership maintained “that women should keep silence in the churches,” citing 1 Corinthians 14:34 as a proof-text that only a man can lead or preach (despite the fact that Paul said earlier that women do pray and prophesy). Women in this church expected that I could not make a decision without the approval of my husband—for he must always lead since, their reading went, “Eve usurped the man’s authority when she took the fruit of the forbidden tree and gave it to the man.”

Due to a military move we relocated, and I felt called to embark upon on a Master’s of Christian Ministry degree. I began to examine the things that my church had taught, while at the same time wrestle with feelings of exclusion: exclusion from Christ’s atoning work on Calvary—since I thought that Christ represented the male and not female. I also questioned whether men and women were equally forgiven. Even though in my head I knew better, in my heart I had come to believe that I as a female was morally inferior to a man and therefore less deserving of grace. I felt pulled apart.

Through my studies I found that Gregory of Nazianzus, who lived at the end of the fourth century, stated, “What is not assumed is not healed or not redeemed.” I came to understand the truth, that Christ represented all humanity, not just men. I also had the help of a professor who didn’t

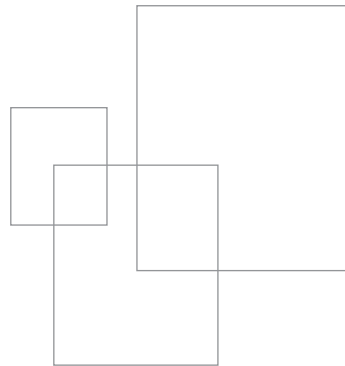
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teach an exclusive, patriarchal perspective. This is one of the reasons I now attend my present congregation which has a female and a male pastor. I believe that male-organized theological reflection tends to muss concerns that are existentially important to women.

A case in point is that I began to see that the gender hierarchy popular in many Christian churches is based on an idea that males and females are in a hierarchical relationship—that women are subordinate—because of an understanding that women have a different role, function, and authority than men. Some Christians base *this* view in a hierarchical understanding of the three persons of the Trinity. But what I learned in my studies is that a hierarchical view of the persons of the Trinity resembles tri-theism—that there are three different gods in the Trinity— more than the ancient understanding that the persons of the Trinity are mutual, equal and intimately relational. What a better Trinitarian model for all human relationships!

*Name withheld by request*



## Discussion Questions

1. How do the experiences you just heard or read make you feel? What affects you the most?
2. What surprised you about any or all of the monologues?
3. What are some of your own observations and experiences of sexism? In what ways are those experiences of sexism marked by other systems of privilege and oppression, such as racism, classism, heterosexism, etc.?
4. In what ways did intersections, such as race, gender and age, affect the narrators' responses to prejudice and injustice?
5. Choose one to three (or all) of the narratives to discuss as case studies.

What is the problem?

What would you say to the writer if she were to share her story directly with you?

What would you do to change the problem if you were in the narrator's shoes?

What is the best thing you can imagine you could do to change the problem if you were a colleague, friend or family member of the narrator?

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What might be some potential risks or consequences of trying to change the problem?

What would you need to overcome these potential risks?

In what ways might your actions, whether as narrator or as friend of the narrator, contribute to *systemic change*—to changing the ways religious bodies, families, organizations, institutions and governments “operate” and define “the way things are?”

6. In what ways do you suppose the stories of physical violence are connected to some of the more implicit problems in other stories?

7. How does your faith influence how you hear and respond to these experiences?

8. What are the best resources from your particular faith or theological tradition for addressing sexism and patriarchy?



Notes

