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Prepared by the Consultative Panel on Lutheran-Muslim Relations of the Office for Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relations, The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. These Talking Points are not intended as position papers, but as discussion starters, with the hope of eliciting a broad range of responses and the deepening of relationships through understanding. Feedback is welcome at the address below or via e-mail to erinfo@elca.org. Bible quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version. English interpretations of the Qur’an are as found in The Qur’an: A new translation by M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, Oxford University Press, 2004.

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TOPICS IN CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS #4

TALKING POINTS

TOPICS IN CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

WOMEN IN ISLAM

People, be mindful of your Lord, who created you from a single soul, and from it created its mate, and from the pair of them spread countless men and women far and wide: be mindful of God, in whose name you make requests of one another. Beware of severing the ties of kinship [lit. “the womb relationships”]: God is always watching over you. Q 4:1

The role and position of women in Islam has become one of the most debated and least understood topics among Muslims and non-Muslims. It has given rise to deep prejudices about the treatment of women in Islam and conjures up images of honor killings, stoning, and women’s bodies clad in black robes and veils (chadors or burqa’s). Women, their dress, and position have become prime symbols in the struggle for Muslim identity, in part because of global media attention to women’s issues in Islam.

While the Qur’an provides the basic rules, rights and expectations concerning women, in reality many rules are influenced by local culture and law. The Qur’an itself presents conflicting views about equality and inequality between men and women.

The Qur’an insists that there is no difference in how God considers the religious and spiritual efforts of men and women (Q 33:35). The fourth surah testifies to men and women’s equality in substance: they are created from a single soul (Q 4:1). Yet, the same chapter refers to men as the “maintainers” of women (Q 4:34). The Qur’an exhorts men and women to decide on family matters by mutual consent, and to love, support and protect each other (Q 2:233, 30:21, 9:71, and 2:187). At the same time, men are allowed to marry up to four women, provided that they practice equal justice to all wives (Q 4:3). Non-Muslims need to be aware that there is great diversity among Muslims today about whether and how such scriptural provisions are to be applied in the current context. In addition, the Qur’an does not allow a woman to be married against her will (Q 4:19), and she is allowed to retain her own possessions (Q 4:21). Finally, the Qur’an
deeply respects a mother’s duty to take care of her children, encouraging her to breastfeed them for two years, and admonishing the husband to provide for his wife (Q 2:233).

During the early centuries of Islam, the texts of the Hadith (a collection of the sayings, advice, and behavior of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions, also known as the Tradition) began to overrule the Qur’an, which teaches that women have rights equal to men. Instead, interpretations developed that assigned duties to women and rights to men. For example, in many cultures it was taken for granted that a woman could never be in a position of authority. But the Hadith also contain numerous observations of the Prophet's respect and appreciation for women, and in fact some Muslim women have had prominent roles of authority, even as heads of government.

The three components of Qur’an, Hadith, and local culture all play roles in the formulations of the Islamic Shari’ah law. Especially the personal status law affects the lives of women through its rules concerning marriage, divorce, child custody and inheritance. As it was traditionally applied, the position of women in Islamic law is on the same level as a child: she always needs the protection of a guardian—her father, uncle, brother, husband or son—who accompanies her and gives permission to move outside the domestic domain. Many Muslims today find that these laws do not reflect their self-understanding as faithful Muslims in the contemporary world.

The law furthermore regulates matters pertaining to purity and impurity, as is the case in some Jewish and Christian circles. Due to menstrual and other bleeding, a woman is impure several times in her life. During those periods she is not allowed to perform the ritual prayer, fast during the month of Ramadan, or touch the Qur’an, since all these acts of worship require a state of ritual purity. These rules, in combination with expectations concerning a woman’s work, traditionally led to the exclusion of women from theological studies. As a result, few women knew the text of the Qur’an, which became the domain of men.

Today the ranks of women who become scholars of Islam are growing rapidly. Just as was the case in the Christian tradition, female scholars of religion have profound influence on the hermeneutics and interpretations of the holy texts. All over the Muslim world, including North America, Muslim female scholars have started to re-interpret the Qur’an in order to recapture its underlying message of mercy and justice. One famous scholar, Amina Wadud, has even challenged the ritual worship rules: although Islamic tradition has insisted that men preach the Friday sermon (khutbah) and lead the public ritual prayers, in March 2005 she led a gender-mixed congregation in New York in their Friday prayer and delivered the sermon.

While religious conventions hold a strong grip on a woman’s circumstances, they are often intertwined with social and economic conditions. Many Muslim women live in war-ridden countries, or in poor areas where birthrates are high and people struggle to feed their children. Services such as clean water, a minimum of health care, and education, are often lacking. These conditions influence a woman’s status and well-being as much as religious rules and conventions. This reality is shared by many women, Muslim or non-Muslim. Women in dire circumstances do not have much time to attend to Qur’anic reinterpretation, although it is one of the avenues to true empowerment and liberation.

**QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. Discuss the status of women in your community. Are women and men afforded the same rights, respect and opportunities? In what way are they equal or not equal in your context?
2. What do you think of the idea that men and women are equal before God, but they have different roles and responsibilities assigned to them by virtue of their gender? Do you see this differently?
3. When you see a woman in a hijab or burqa, what assumptions have you made about her? Have you had other experiences that challenged your initial assumptions? Reflect upon other signs of religion that people wear, such as a necklace with a cross. How are these signs similar or different from one another?
4. As stated above, Muslim women today are seeking out the Qur’an's "underlying message of mercy and justice." In many important Qur’anic passages they find affirmations of the full co-humanity of men and women under God; at the same time they are challenged by other Qur’anic passages that appear to assert male privileges and prerogatives. Can similar things be said about Christian women and their relationships to the Bible? How do you read the Scripture's witness to these matters?