

Made in God's image: ELCA initiatives elevate women

When the 2009 ELCA Churchwide Assembly authorized the development of a social statement on women and justice, issues related to the topic weren't dominating the headlines. Today national conversations on sexual misconduct, gender justice and institutional sexism have taken hold in a way that suggests a lasting cultural impact.

The ELCA Task Force on Women and Justice: One in Christ (ELCA.org/womenandjustice) has been at work since 2012, bolstered by Mission Support funds. The social statement draft the task force helped shape—which examines gender-based violence, workplace discrimination, economic inequality, gender role expectations, and use of Scripture and theology—will be edited with reference to public feedback and presented as a proposed social statement for a vote at the 2019 ELCA Churchwide Assembly.

In her work with the task force, Fern Lee Hagedorn came to see “sexism not just as a women’s issue but one that harms women and girls, men and boys, as well as those who don’t fall into set gender categories.”

Hagedorn also realized that race, economics, education, immigration status and age add to the complexity of issues facing women. “I am grateful to be part of a church that speaks up on behalf of all who are made in God’s image,” she said.

Another important ELCA initiative elevating women is the ELCA rostered women of color project (ELCA.org/rwoc), led by Wyvetta Bullock, ELCA executive for administration, and Cheryl Pero, emeritus professor at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago.

“God’s Faithfulness on the Journey,” a resource created by the project’s committee and partially funded by Mission Support, highlights reflections from 42 women leaders of color in this church.

“God has called and continues to call women of color as leaders in this church, yet their ministry experiences are often characterized by discouragement and lack of support,” wrote Bullock and Pero in the introduction to that resource. “We initiated [the rostered women of color project] to change this.”

Thulie Beresford, an ELCA chaplain, was among those who shared their stories.

At 18, Beresford knew she wanted to be a pastor, but her home church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa, was not yet ordaining women. After graduating from college, she received a scholarship to complete her master’s at Ohio University in Athens, where she attended Christ Lutheran Church.

“There I met for the first time a female Lutheran pastor, Patricia Lull, and my heart began to burn within me knowing I could be a pastor,” Beresford wrote.

Two years later, with support from Lull, Beresford enrolled at Trinity Lutheran Seminary, Columbus, Ohio. Now Beresford serves at Franke at Seaside, a continuing care retirement community in Mount Pleasant, S.C., a ministry of the ELCA South Carolina Synod.

“Yes, there have been challenges,” she recalled. “What has strengthened me are the words of a mentor: ‘If you feel like quitting at least three times a week, then you are being faithful to your call.’”

By showcasing stories of hardship, hope and courage, “God’s Faithfulness on the Journey” joins the ELCA in its work of breaking the silence and celebrating women of color.

