



## Leader's Preparation Guide for "Seeking Understanding: Some Issues in Biblical Interpretation Regarding Women and Justice"

Thank you for facilitating a conversation around the topic of scriptural interpretation and women and justice. Over the centuries the Bible has been, as Luther put it, the manger showing forth God's goodness and pointing us to Christ. Over the centuries the Bible also has too often been used as an instrument to limit the role of women in the church and to suppress their full participation in the world. This study will engage participants in a conversation about how the Bible can be faithfully utilized in a discussion of the views on the position of women in the church and the world.



"Seeking Understanding: Some Issues in Biblical Interpretation Regarding Women and Justice" is a study resource provided by the ELCA Task Force on Women and Justice: One in Christ. It is one tool among several the task force has approved for discussing questions around women and justice in church and society. (For more information, visit [www.elca.org/womenandjustice](http://www.elca.org/womenandjustice).) Each section of this leader's preparation guide provides background and helpful guidance for leading this study.

### An overview

"Seeking Understanding: Some Issues in Biblical Interpretation Regarding Women and Justice" includes the following PDFs for download. Most of these materials are designed for those who lead the study; the handouts are for participants:

- "Leader's Preparation Guide and Overview"
- "Guide for Session One: Lutherans and Scripture"
- Handout for session one
- "Guide for Session Two: Historical Issues of Problematic Biblical Interpretation Regarding Women"
- Handout for session two
- "Guide for Session Three: The Book of Faith, Women and Justice"
- Handout for session three
- Useful tools
  - "Some Issues in Biblical Interpretation Regarding Women and Justice"
  - "Some Helpful Ways to Read the Bible"

## Useful tools

There are two primary tools to equip you as you facilitate this discussion in your context, whether within a congregational setting or elsewhere. The first is a document produced by Dr. Erik Heen, John H. P. Reumann Chair of Biblical Studies at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia. Heen, a member of the task force, has produced a background paper titled, "Some Issues in Biblical Interpretation Regarding Women and Justice." A version of this paper was presented to the ELCA Women and Justice Task Force and they found it useful in their discussions. The task force hopes that this study resource based on that paper will engage conversation about both the appropriate and inappropriate ways the Bible has been used in discussions about women in church and society.

The second document is by Dr. Diane Jacobson, Professor Emerita of Old Testament, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minn., and initial director of the ELCA Book of Faith Initiative. "Some Helpful Ways to Read the Bible" introduces those unfamiliar with the Book of Faith Initiative and its four-fold method of studying Scripture.

Heen utilizes the Book of Faith methods in his presentation. Familiarize yourself with both of these documents because they are helpful resources.

If the study group is not acquainted with the Book of Faith Initiative's four ways to approach the Bible, one option is to devote an initial session to a favorite Bible passage and approach that text

## About the social statement process within the ELCA

The ELCA takes seriously its faithful witness and participation in society. Social statements are teaching and policy documents that guide the engagement and advocacy work of the ELCA within society. The development of a social statement on women and justice in church and society was authorized by the 2009 ELCA Churchwide Assembly in response to memorials from four synods and the recommendation of the ELCA Church Council. The work toward the creation of a task force began in 2010 but was then delayed until 2012.

The development of any social statement is based on an extensive process of study, prayer and discernment. Since 2012, the ELCA Task Force on Women and Justice: One in Christ has engaged in a great deal of each of these, as well as a great deal of listening. The task force has authorized the preparation of various study materials and hosted more than 70 listening events in many synods and at various churchwide gatherings. (The next major step will be an in-depth study with an expected release date of June 2016.) For more about the work of the task force, visit [www.ELCA.org/womenandjustice](http://www.ELCA.org/womenandjustice).

Groups throughout the ELCA are encouraged to use the various study materials for conversation and their own discernment. They are also urged to share the central points of their conversation with the task force. Responses to this study resource may be shared with the task force via email: [womenandjustice@elca.org](mailto:womenandjustice@elca.org).

In fall of 2017, the task force expects to release a draft social statement to be discussed and shared widely throughout the ELCA, once again encouraging that comments and reflections be sent to the task force. It is anticipated that a social statement on women and justice will be brought to the 2019 Churchwide Assembly for adoption.

For additional information on how social statements come into being visit:

[http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Policies\\_and\\_Procedures.pdf](http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Policies_and_Procedures.pdf).

Encourage your group to identify and share their input into this process as they participate in this study. Again, comments and responses should be shared with the task force via email: [womenandjustice@elca.org](mailto:womenandjustice@elca.org).

in the four-fold way suggested by Jacobson (i.e., through devotional, historical, literary and Lutheran theological readings). There are many more downloadable resources available at the ELCA Book of Faith webpage ([www.bookoffaith.org/](http://www.bookoffaith.org/)) that could be explored by individuals or the group. For additional tools that may be purchased, explore the resources under the “Foundational Resources” tab on the Book of Faith webpage on the Augsburg Fortress website.

### **Important reminders**

It is important to have an understanding of your congregational and community context and its history of the discussion of the role of women in church and society. Be aware that sexism and patriarchy (social organization in which males dominate) are still a reality in today's society. Be attuned to conversation that may, in fact, seek to suppress the full value and role of women in church and society or that may undermine women in anyway.

Also be aware that some texts in the Bible are, in fact, simply damaging to women. Author Phyllis Trible refers to these as “texts of terror” in her book “Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives” (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1984). Two such examples are Abraham’s use of his wife, Sarah, for his own protection (Genesis 12:10-20) and Shechem’s rape of Dinah (Genesis 34:1-19). Neither of these texts is the best to use when focusing on issues of women and justice because of the unjust way women are treated in them.

One also needs to acknowledge that male God language is dominant in the Scriptures, so it is easy to forget the passages that do refer to God as female. It would be worth your time to do an Internet search on “female images of God in the Bible” to learn about these images. Both of these topics may be raised in a much broader study as the social statement process continues, but it is good to make note of them here.

Seek to be as inclusive as possible in recruiting the participants in your study. Diversity of ages, sexual orientation, ethnicity, economic status and gender will introduce new insights into the conversation.

Room set-up will affect the types of conversations that occur. Sit in a circle or around a large table. Consider using the suggested set-up option(s) in each session, especially if the conversation happens in the context of a retreat or day-long event.

*Keep in mind that you are facilitating a conversation and don't need to have all the answers to questions that may arise.* The list of useful resources and references below contains a number of leads that participants can turn to should the conversation pique their interest. Thanks to the widespread use of the Internet, they can also do a search on topics during and after the class.

**Session overviews:**

**Session one** gives background information and practice in utilizing the Book of Faith Initiative approaches to Scripture. It will also offer the opportunity to discuss Lutheran theological understanding of Scripture as described in Heen's "Women and Justice: Issues in Biblical Interpretation." Although you have options, you are encouraged to begin with this first session in your conversation as it is foundational for those that follow.

**Session two** acknowledges that there have been issues with problematic Biblical interpretations regarding women and their place in society. This session will look at some of these head-on to see where they originated and how they continue today. It will also look at which approaches to Scripture may not be helpful and why.

**Session three** is a review of some of the helpful approaches to Scripture that can inform the study related to women and justice. For example, how did Jesus invert the social structure of his day? What might this mean for us today?

**Communications guidelines**

Open each session by reading or reminding the group of the following communications guidelines. In the first session ask the participants if there are any other guidelines they would like to include. Print this and post the guidelines in your room so they are easily accessible to all.

1. We will acknowledge the presence of the Holy Spirit and be attentive to what is being stirred up in our midst.
2. We agree to listen to each other respectfully without making assumptions or judgments.
3. We recognize that each person has different experiences and different styles of communicating.
4. We will each own our own thoughts and feelings and speak in "I" statements rather than "you" statements that define others.
5. We will approach our conversation from a stance of being curious and ask questions of each other to draw out the intended meaning of the speaker.
6. We will keep confidentiality, which means not sharing the stories of others outside of the group unless specifically told otherwise.

(This is loosely based on 12 guidelines for more effective communications found in "Our Community: Dealing with Conflict in Our Congregation" by Susan M. Lang.)

## Time options

This study could be used in a variety of ways:

1. The study is written to be three distinct sessions and can be used that way during a Sunday school hour or weekly Bible study time.
2. If you want to go into a more in-depth conversation, you can break each session into two units.

Session one could be divided: a) Background on social statements, Book of Faith initiative background and ELCA understanding of God's Word; b) Practice with the Book of Faith approaches.

Session two could be divided: a) Discussion of the four-fold approaches to Scripture with Erik Heen additions; b) Using the approaches and considering specific texts and our context.

Session three could be divided: a) Review and use of the literary approach; b) How Jesus redefines power and discussion of Galatians 3:27-28.

3. This study could also be used as a one-day retreat. The above breakdowns could be an outline for the day.

Many congregations now hold conversations about the Bible and contemporary topics in restaurants and pubs. Consider having a conversation on the topic of the use of the Bible regarding women and church and society beyond the confines of the church building. Be creative and be open to the movement of the Holy Spirit in your midst!

## Supplies needed:

- Bibles (Have at least one study Bible on hand for reference during the conversation.)  
Recommended: The Lutheran Study Bible (New Revised Standard Version).  
Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2009. It is also good to have a variety of translations on hand to see how different translations give a variety of perspectives on the text.
- The Book of Faith bookmark may be downloaded or ordered in quantities of 20 by calling the ELCA at 800-638-3522 and requesting the Book of Faith Bookmark or code PRJ013271-0309. It may also be downloaded at:  
[http://www.bookoffaith.org/bof\\_new/logos/SABFBookmarkFNL.pdf](http://www.bookoffaith.org/bof_new/logos/SABFBookmarkFNL.pdf)
- Reading Scripture with Five Lutheran Lenses downloadable bookmark:  
[http://www.bookoffaith.org/bof\\_new/logos/Five\\_Lutheran\\_Lenses.pdf?v=1](http://www.bookoffaith.org/bof_new/logos/Five_Lutheran_Lenses.pdf?v=1)

- Copies of “Issues in Biblical Interpretation” by Dr. Erik Heen, for those who may want to dig deeper into the topic of biblical interpretation and women:  
([www.ELCA.org/womenandjustice](http://www.ELCA.org/womenandjustice))
- Copies of “Some Helpful Ways to Read the Bible” by Dr. Diane Jacobson located at:  
<http://www.bookoffaith.org/pdf/Some%20Helpful%20Ways%20to%20Read%20the%20Bible-3.pdf>
- Pens and paper
- Chart paper and markers to collect group reflections

### Useful resources and references:

- Women and Justice Task Force website: [www.ELCA.org/womenandjustice](http://www.ELCA.org/womenandjustice).
- ELCA Book of Faith Initiative website: [www.bookoffaith.org](http://www.bookoffaith.org).
- The Book of Faith Facebook page, where a number of helpful files have been uploaded to aid in introducing the four ways to approach the Bible:  
[www.facebook.com/groups/227520933975328/](http://www.facebook.com/groups/227520933975328/). Here you can also engage in conversation with leaders and congregational members who have been involved with the initiative. It's social media, so feel free to ask questions and make comments.
- Freeman, Lindsay Hardin. *Bible Women: All Their Words and Why They Matter*. Cincinnati: Forward Movement (in partnership with the Episcopal Church Women), 2014.
- Jacobson, Diane, Mark Allan Powell, and Stanley N. Olson, et al. *Opening the Book of Faith: Lutheran Insights for Bible Study*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008.
- Powell, Mark Allan. *How Lutherans Interpret the Bible*. (DVD) Inver Grove Heights, Minn.: Select Learning, 2006. [www.selectlearning.org/store/all/how-lutherans-interpret-bible](http://www.selectlearning.org/store/all/how-lutherans-interpret-bible).
- A literary guide to the Bible such as: Leland Ryken and Tremper Longman III, editors, *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993.
- Malina, Bruce J. and Richard L. Rohrbaugh. *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003.
- Malina, Bruce J. and Richard L. Rohrbaugh. *Social Science Commentary on the Gospel of John*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998.
- Malina, Bruce J. and John J. Pilch. *Social Science Commentary on the Letters of Paul*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006.
- Malina, Bruce J. and John J. Pilch. *Social Science Commentary on the Deutero-Pauline Letters*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013.
- Stendahl, Krister. *The Bible and the Role of Women* (Facet Books Biblical Series). Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966. Reprinted 1986. (Note: This publication is out of print but can be accessed and ordered through online booksellers.)
- Trigilio Jr., John and Kenneth Brighenti. *Women in the Bible for Dummies*. Indianapolis: John Wiley and Sons, 2005.

(Once you select the Bible passages you will discuss in each session, check with church staff to see if there are Bible commentaries available that might be helpful to have on hand for the class.)