



Talk amongst Yourselves: Political Debate among Women of the ELCA

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IN 1970, WHEN WOMEN IN THE AMERICAN LUTHERAN CHURCH AND THE Lutheran Church in America first had opportunity to be called into the public ministry of word and sacrament, the feminist movement of the day was just gaining steam. Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, books of the first half of the 1960s, had begun to impact young women. As Lutheran clergywomen began entering a profession that until that time had been exclusively male, they encountered difficulties which can hardly be imagined today. Set into a male-defined role, they not only caused male clergy to change their self-definition, they also caused uncertainties among their sisters as everyone tried to understand and work through the radically changing roles of women in the church. The pastor's wife no longer functioned as she had—as something of the pastor to women—and women were no longer expected to work only in the church basement. They now took public leadership. Every woman had to sort out for herself who she was going to be, with very few models or mentors to help her find her way through this new maze of expectations and roles.

I. WHO SPEAKS FOR WOMEN?

The redefining of women's roles and the subsequent renegotiating of the social contract resulting from this change has not yet run its course. "Who speaks for women?" and "What do women want?" are questions that continue to be

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asked. At the same time, church and society are involved in what has been termed a “culture war” over the place of women: What answers will society, or church, choose to adopt? Those who have attended to what James Davison Hunter calls “the culture wars” can see there are many voices in the marketplace of American ideas competing to speak for any number of people. This is as it should be in a democratic society.

As the conflict has become sharper, however, the marketplace of ideas has become less a marketplace and more a battlefield, with basically two opposing forces. Hunter discusses these “armies clashing by night.” One side consists of those with “an impulse toward orthodoxy”; the other side has “an impulse toward progressivism.” According to Hunter they are battling for the soul of America on the basis of their competing moral visions.¹ An observer looking at this war might find reason to despair, because each side holds so few ideas in common; in fact, one is a critique of the other. One has its roots in what was originally called the counterculture. This radical critique of American culture emerged during the Viet Nam war protests, Watergate, etc., and has since matured, but retains its deep suspicions of western institutions. This new left, which Peter Berger associates with the new “information classes,” is, on the whole, convinced that the traditional values of America are unexamined ploys by the white-male establishment to maintain power. The right, traditionally associated with the commercial classes, tends to believe in the American dream of equal opportunity for those who are willing to work for it, regardless of their cultural backgrounds. In other words, they hold very few assumptions about culture and the roles of men and women in common.

Debates cannot be joined if the debaters have no common understandings. Two radically opposing visions of the world—especially moral visions, as in the cold war—finally have no recourse but to march against each other, or, it is to be devoutly hoped in our case, live together in uneasy truces. Though these warnings may seem dire, we do need to understand how deep the chasm is between the “orthodox” and “progressive” camps in this battle for the soul of America, and, by logical extension, the churches—especially, for the purposes of this article, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The mainline churches in America over the past decades have had a well documented tilt toward the “progressive” side of the battlefield as they have attempted to speak “relevantly” or “prophetically” to the culture. On the other hand, people with “orthodox” religious commitments, even old-line liberals of the 1960s, may feel they are being relentlessly pushed to the right by those on the left whose positions on moral questions seem, to them, to be leading to societal chaos.²

¹James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991) 43.

²The commonplace that the economy is the only governing value in an election was sorely tested in the 1994 elections. Some observers have seen them as being mostly about cultural values. Newt Gingrich, the newly elected Speaker of the House, contrasted the Democrats, as supporters of a deviant cultural set of values, with Republicans, who were “normal” Americans.

When the 1960s ended, the two visions competing for women's loyalty were still clearly drawn: career girl or housewife? Traditional housewifery did not seem very attractive at the time to future yuppies at Woodstock. Alternate life-styles shimmered with possibilities for many, and the counterculture began assembling its reasons for being: generally attacks on the bourgeois values of their parents. Between these two proposals for an American future there seemed to be almost no ground for accommodation, because we were talking not simply about opposing ideas in which a compromiser could come and effect an agreement, but about a conversion or paradigm shift. In much the same way as William James argued that there were either "the once born" or "the twice born" in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*, it may be that only one political conversion, or paradigm shift, is possible for most people. Early feminists spoke of the "click" — that moment in their lives when they suddenly realized that the society around them was sexist. From that moment, their entire vision of things was fundamentally altered and now they knew "the way things were." In the cultural life of the early 1970s, as I remember it, many women, who had happily married during or right after college because everyone was doing it, suddenly felt their lives being redefined around them; they began to envy my single state, something that had only a few years before terrified them. This change was radical in every sense of the word, and reached down to the very roots of civic life. When I first began teaching at Luther College in 1968, the women with Ph.D.s teaching with me were few and far between. Those few had been recruited by the dean for several reasons, the most compelling that the college needed to have women Ph.D.s in order to qualify for A.A.U.W. and its standards for accreditation. Without that, very little effort would have been made to recruit them. However, by the mid-1970s deans were scurrying to find qualified women to teach in every department because of the growing political pressure, based on the idea that women students needed female role models. We wanted, even at that time, a variety of women professors — single, married, married with children, etc. — so the young women with aspirations for a career would not be put off by their discovery that most academic women of the day had not married.

For those who were not present in those days, it is difficult to explain what it was like. The early 1970s bristled with an apocalyptic sense that nothing traditional could survive, that what was new, from bellbottoms to the modernized *Book of Common Prayer*, was the thing (though in retrospect most of it seems unexceptional). The pill, with the resultant sexual revolution, and new self-actualization gurus of all kinds caused so much social and moral turmoil that nothing from before 1965 seemed in any way usable, or, the big word: relevant. Women could choose not to have children, and many young academic women did, in fact, postpone childbearing until later. Women who did have children met with some disapprobation for contributing to the population bomb, which Paul Ehrlich had persuaded us would explode around us with Malthusian horror by the 1980s. I remember sitting with a group of faculty wives in the early '70s as we spoke of how difficult it was to feel joy when a child had been born in our midst because it had

come into such a terrible world. The cultural mavens of feminism were Gloria Steinem, Adrienne Rich, Robin Morgan, Doris Lessing, Marilyn French, and other such writers for *Ms. Magazine*. Steinem, who had been a *Playboy* bunny and lived with a man in what she later described as an abusive relationship, seemed more attractive to us at the time than the picture of Marabel Morgan's *Total Woman* (1973) meeting her husband at the door in Saran wrap.³

There was no competing vision for women in the academy with any intellectual respectability. Gloria Steinem and Bella Abzug held sway. The commonplaces of academic feminists began to be widely shared as the number of women on faculties grew. If one was an intellectual woman, one was a feminist. So we watched with eagle eyes for sexism and marked it down when it came unbidden from the lips of our male colleagues. We valued and enjoyed our solidarity. Loyalty to women was the main virtue we cultivated. At no time was one to publicly criticize another woman or publicly engage in a debate with a "sister" — unless, of course, she was not a feminist. Sisterhood — among feminists — was powerful.

II. TWO KINDS OF FEMINISM?

Those times seem as distant as creation now. Soon a younger generation of women came along who thought of us as being part of the establishment. They took our commitments to an institution of the church to be compromising, and the goals we had fought for on their behalf unremarkable, including maternity leave, equal pay, and more women faculty. They had other issues. It is an old story, as old as generational conflict in any time. I was only twenty-five when I found myself sitting on committees making decisions about things in the college that I was far too young to decide about — like governance and faculty affairs — long before I understood what my role and powers were. I was there, I knew, to represent the women's voice, but what that voice was seemed unclear to me. But I was a token — about that there can be no debate. Now that I am old enough to be a crone, with some passing knowledge of the church and academia, I do not sit on those committees and am, thankfully, left to my own devices. But the chasm between the "orthodox" and "progressive" sides has continued to grow apace.

If one looks closely, however, there were signs, even in the nineteenth century, of an uneasy truce between two opposing views of feminism. These have existed ever since Elizabeth Cady Stanton, a freethinker who felt the church was the cause of female subjugation, pushed for equal rights because women were equal to men. On the other hand, Susan B. Anthony, her good friend and colleague whose only goal was the vote, cultivated church women and expressed profound dismay when the redoubtable Mrs. Stanton, weary of Anthony's fixation on the vote, leveled many a broadside at the church and its clergy. Anthony's single-

³Camille Paglia has made the interesting suggestion that at least Marabel Morgan understood the darker urges and pleasures of the body, as opposed to the oddly puritanical vision of Gloria Steinem's *Moving Beyond Words* (1994). See Paglia's *Vamps and Tramps* (1994).

mindedness caused her to forge alliances with many different women's organizations, among them the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). The line of reasoning promoting "The Cause" of women's suffrage, in the hands of later feminists of the early twentieth century, argued that women were morally superior to men and would vote, if they could, to rid the United States of demon rum and war.⁴ These two kinds of feminism collided both in the 1920s and in the 1980s when the Equal Rights Amendment failed to gain support or ultimately be ratified, partly because some believed that women were morally superior to men, and not equal to them.⁵ It is interesting to note that the women's movement, both in the nineteenth century and now in the late twentieth century, began with the struggle for equal rights and seems to be ending with the politics of difference. In the same way that women in the early twentieth century worked to pass legislation which gave women and children better working conditions because women needed protection, so now many feminists are arguing for legislation that also recognizes the difference between men and women, such as the anti-pornography laws that, with the support of Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, have become law in Canada on the grounds that pornography is violence against all women.

Since Carol Gilligan's work *In a Different Voice* (1982), on the different ways men and women make moral choices, the feminists ascribing to the theory of difference have been regnant. Christina Hoff Sommers describes current divisions in feminism as a conflict between "gender" feminism of the kind espoused by Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, and the "equity" feminism of the venerable Betty Friedan and even the outrageous Camille Paglia.⁶ For Sommers, "gender" feminists are those who "believe that all our institutions, from the state to the family to the grade schools, perpetuate male domination."⁷ The "equity" feminists are those who, in line with the humanistic, liberal feminism of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, want women to enjoy the same rights as men.⁸ "We ask no better laws than those you have made for yourselves. We need no other protection than that

⁴One of the forgotten facts of history is that Frances Willard, the formidable founder of the WCTU, required all those who took the pledge against liquor also to vow to support women's suffrage, thus insuring their vote against liquor. Though women could not ultimately vote for prohibition, it is no accident that the Volstead Act, or the Eighteenth Amendment to the U. S. Constitution, prohibiting the manufacture and distribution of alcohol in the United States, was ratified at about the same time that the Nineteenth Amendment, giving women the vote, was also under debate.

⁵See Ellen Carol DuBois in her "Introduction: Part 3," to *Elizabeth Cady Stanton/Susan B. Anthony, Correspondence, Writings, Speeches* (New York: Schocken, 1981) 200, note 72; DuBois notes that the feminists of the early twentieth century had worked to pass laws protecting women in the work force, statutory rape laws, and prohibition, which were repealed by the 1970s feminists because they did not promote equality.

⁶Christina Hoff Sommers, *Who Stole Feminism? How Women Have Betrayed Women* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994).

⁷*Ibid.*, 18.

⁸As I hope my reader is aware, these categories are tricky. Gloria Steinem, whom Sommers describes as a "gender" feminist, is dead against studies such as the recent one that discovered that men's brains are different from women's brains, because it could lead to sexual stereotyping. On the other hand, Steinem will also argue that women as a group suffer from low self-esteem and should be helped to get rid of it so they can achieve more of what they deserve.

which your present laws secure to you," said Stanton in 1854 when she spoke before the New York State Legislature.⁹ On the other hand, Stanton's sharp criticism of Christianity as the source of women's woes, especially in *The Woman's Bible* where she used the historical-critical approach to revise what she thought of as the troubling misogynist passages of scripture, makes her a sister of the most radical feminists. Others like Frances Willard of the WCTU led a movement of what could be called late-nineteenth-century Christian feminism, which espoused the idea that Christianity had, in fact, elevated the place of women in society. Part of the great missionary movement of the nineteenth century was led by devout Christian women intent on raising the quality of life for women around the world.¹⁰

Feminism has shattered across this divide, and the churches have become battlegrounds where these visions compete as well. After some years of feminist solidarity, a vigorous critique of the gender feminists by the equity feminists has begun, as some women, viewing with dismay what they regard as the tyranny of gender feminists such as Catherine MacKinnon, have been finding their voices. These range from Sally Quinn, whose January 1992 article in the *Washington Post* stated that the women's movement needed new leadership, to the most recent book by Daphne Patai and Noretta Koertge.¹¹

III. REVISIONISTS OR REFORMERS?

These nearly continental rifts in self-understanding between women on either side of the divide obtain in the contemporary mainline churches. Who speaks for women in the various denominations has been bitterly disputed not only by the women, but also by the men in the church. There is perhaps no better example of the dispute than the Re-Imagining Conference held in Minneapolis during November 1993. While it was women in the mainline denominational bureaucracies who planned the event, with substantial support from their church structures, it has been women outside of the bureaucracy who have been its chief—and by any measure—severest critics.¹² The fundamental issue is how Christian women should interpret the past and hand it on to the next generation. How a Christian feminist does this will indicate rather clearly whether she is going to be one who *re-imagines* the Christian faith or one who attempts to be *faithful* to

⁹Elizabeth Cady Stanton, "Address to the Legislature of New York on Women's Rights, February 14, 1854," in *Elizabeth Cady Stanton/Susan B. Anthony, Correspondence, Writings, Speeches*, 51.

¹⁰Halvor Ronning's wife, Hannah, a missionary with him in China, and later the first president of the Hauge Synod's Mission Dove Society, hardly ever wrote or spoke of her work and the work of the mission society without making it clear that it was being done for the sake of women in China, so they could learn about Jesus and be raised up from their low estate.

¹¹See Sally Quinn, "The Women's Movement Needs New Leadership," *Minneapolis/St. Paul Star Tribune* (28 January 1992), and Daphne Patai and Noretta Koertge, *Professing Feminist: Cautionary Tales from the Strange World of Women's Studies* (New York: Basic Books, 1995).

¹²For example, Mary Ann Lundy, associate director for churchwide planning at the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), was one of the leaders in the Re-Imagining Conference. Her critics, women like Nancy Smith, a United Methodist laywoman and senior financial analyst for the University of Cincinnati Medical Center, were generally lay women outside of the corporate structures of the church.

the doctrinal insights of the past that come to her in the creeds and confessions of the Christian church.¹³

How to interpret and hand on the Christian tradition is a question for every Christian. For the re-imaginers, or gender feminists (called by some feminist theologians "revisionists"), the church is a patriarchal institution in which women are ignored, mistreated, or even abused, largely because the Christian tradition, beginning with the story of Adam and Eve, has been used to justify patriarchy. It is, thus, necessary for these women to change the language of the Bible and worship to make it inclusive of women's experience, and to update the outdated ideas in the Bible that are sexist and damaging to women, because the ultimate truths of Christianity can be reconstructed so that they are affirming of women. Some radical feminists, like Mary Daly, and others who have followed her, have ultimately left the church to become "post-Christian" feminists, because they have decided even the task of revision is useless. They want a new religion that is more fair to women. For these feminists, their most important commitment is feminism. Still, there are feminists who choose to stay within the church and confess the name of Jesus, but who are not afraid to rethink their Christian faith and even discard basic Christian dogmas and symbols, such as the cross (as a symbol of divine child abuse), if the latter conflict with feminism. They see themselves as responding to the biblical imperative to do justice, even if it means smashing the brass serpent, as Hezekiah did when the people began to idolize it. This would fit with Hunter's "impulse toward progressivism," which marks one side of the cultural fault line. To the Christian equity feminists, this seems like another gospel (Gal 1:8-10).

On the other hand, those who might be called "Christian equity feminists" (or "reformers") believe that women should have an equal place with no special favors, and also believe that the tradition, at its best, reveals the truth about human existence: that all human endeavors are deeply tainted with sin and Jesus Christ is the only one who can save. They are not so interested in changing the traditional documents of the faith they confess (though many of them would agree with the gender feminists that language referring to "men" and "brothers" does not refer to women) because these documents speak the truth about the human predicament. The reformers see themselves as doing what Christ has called them to do: proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. They have, by Hunter's lights, an "impulse toward orthodoxy." To the gender feminists, they are traitors to women.

This fault line exists as well between women in the ELCA. It may even be institutionalized in its structures. The Commission for Women has as its constitutional mandate "advocacy for women," while the Women of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (WELCA) was supposed to continue the more traditional women's organization. Constitutionally, however, they both have much the same agenda. The ELCA Constitution states that the Commission for

¹³These names are significant. It is telling that the St. Olaf Conferences ("Call to Faithfulness," 1991 and 1993) were gravely concerned about the feminists, many of whose representatives gathered together in Minneapolis for the Re-imagining Conference.

Women “shall enable this church to realize the full participation of women; to create equal opportunity for women of all cultures; to foster partnership between men and women; to assist this church to address sexism; to advocate justice for women in this church and society.”¹⁴ The Women of the ELCA, while primarily not an advocacy group, has constitutional language that drives it strongly toward advocacy. Among its various constitutionally mandated responsibilities, the second, after Bible study, reflection, and prayer, is cooperating “with other units of this church in advocating for the oppressed and voiceless, urging change in systems and structures which exclude and alienate, and working for peace and justice as messengers of hope.”¹⁵ In addition, the Executive Director of the Commission for Women is required by the constitution to be on the WELCA board and work interdependently with it. In the ELCA, as in other mainline denominations, the gender feminists seem to be comfortably ensconced in the bureaucracy by constitutional mandate, while the equity feminists seem to be kept outside the structures of the national church.¹⁶ This impression is just that—an impression—but that such an impression exists at all tends to alienate the majority of women in the church who do not identify themselves with what they perceive to be the feminist cause. It is likely, in fact, that more women than not in the ELCA—as in the wider culture—would reject the notion that they are feminists, even though many of them hold non-traditional jobs, favor equal rights for women, and expect women to be intimately involved in all the work of the congregation, from pastor to usher to congregational president. Here the chasm is one between the leadership and the constituency. The leaders see their role as a crusade to change the minds of women in the church to their way of thinking. Both the structural requirements of the church and the typical political leanings of the leadership classes in the mainline churches tend to make the leadership impervious to criticism because they see their stance as “prophetic” over against the status quo—which is what their job descriptions require. If the leadership group in this debate has as its constitutional mission changing the minds of the other side, which is the constituency, it is to be expected that the controversies will be heated.

Jean Bethke Elshtain, a professor of ethics at the University of Chicago, has noted in her most recent book how our fierce commitments to ideologies have made it easy for us to fling about fighting words that will brook no disagreement. Referring to an incident in which a women’s studies professor in Canada inquired of others whether or not she was an “apostate from academic feminism,” Elshtain worries about “the breezy use of the language of apostasy” and the subsequent implied interdiction of her book because it was “unsuitable” for a women’s studies

¹⁴ELCA Constitution 16.41.D87, *Commission for Women*.

¹⁵ELCA Constitution 16.51.A87, *Responsibilities of the Women’s Organizations*.

¹⁶As I have argued elsewhere, the quota system can be used by church bureaucrats to systematically exclude both men and women who disagree with their aims and ambitions. Once I nominated a woman for a position on a committee, and other women on the committee, whom I would name as prominent “gender” feminists, would not approve her until they knew whether or not she was a feminist. See “Quotas in the ELCA,” *Lutheran Forum* 26/4 (1992) 61-62.

class.¹⁷ For those of us within the church, this kind of language is familiar. We know what it means to subscribe to a creed or to be apostate. Those with a hard and fast commitment to “progressivism” have a prior set of beliefs about the human situation that they regard as ultimate. These commitments are no less serious for the “progressive” woman than the vows made by the “orthodox” ordinand when she confesses her loyalty to the scriptures and Lutheran confessions. It is instructive to note that in the language describing the work of the women’s organization, which is the living heir to millions of faithful Lutheran women who gathered together, prayed, and worked hard for world missions, there is not a word about the mission of Jesus Christ to the world. All the constitutional language is concerned with the internal structuring of the organization and the creation of networks of support for women, within the organization and throughout the world. From this language, it is not difficult to conclude that the highest value of those writing the constitutional language was justice for women, not mission. This is not trivial.

As one who tends toward “orthodoxy,” I have been troubled that generally in the institutional structures of the ELCA one can be an apostate from scripture and the confessions with fewer consequences than one can be an apostate from the orthodoxies of radical feminism.¹⁸ I have never quite recovered from hearing a faculty advisor at one of our seminaries counsel women students who were worried about their upcoming certification interviews *to lie* to their committees about their commitments to the Lutheran confessions rather than risk not getting onto the clergy roster where they could then begin to change things in favor of women. In other words, the feminist cause was more important than the Christian creeds and, especially, the Lutheran confessions. I am sure she would have argued that she was also deeply committed to the faith, but her interpretation of it could not be found in the creeds and Lutheran confessions.

These things are difficult to speak of. I am not ungrateful, nor I hope, disloyal, to those who fought to make it possible for women to take leadership roles in society or the church. Without them, I would not be where I am today. That, however, is precisely the difficulty. If, to be grateful to them, I must remain in total agreement with all women everywhere and support every idea promulgated by a certain brand of feminism, the point of my being an academic professor sworn to defend and interpret the Lutheran confessions is lost. For one thing, it is impossible to agree with all women everywhere because women do not everywhere agree. If one is truly interested in promoting the cause of women, it would seem to me one would want women of every kind of political stripe participating in the conversation in order to contribute to its greater richness and, ultimately, its greater good.

¹⁷Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Democracy on Trial* (New York: Basic Books, 1995) xvi.

¹⁸My colleague Nancy Koester argues persuasively that the Woodstock generation had its revival in 1969 and is now hardening into its own set of orthodoxies, even fundamentalism, as every reforming movement or revival has done through history. So, though the gender feminists have had their “click” or moment of enlightenment, which has made them tend toward progressivism, they are now often fundamentalists of their experience.

As I ponder this history, I am intrigued by several things, the most complicated being the way women have traditionally bonded and fought with one another. Margaret Atwood's novels, at their very best, have shown the complicated ways in which little girls, and then grown women, form shifting alliances, first with one, then another—creating insiders and outsiders. Her book, *Cat's Eye*, shows how little girls change their loyalties with cruel and terrifying consequences. Finding and getting approval from one's peers is vital for the young woman who is setting out on her life, as it was for me. It may also be why women find it so difficult to disagree in public and tend, like worried mothers shushing the children, to want the fighting to stop, even when the disagreements are fair and vital. I was recently stunned to learn that Anne Taylor Fleming, a feminist commentator on the *MacNeil/Lehrer News Hour*, has written a book regretting that she had waited too long to have children because the leaders of the feminist movement in the 1970s appeared to frown on having children. Now that children are "in," however, women without husbands are having children on their own, this just at a time when illegitimacy is receiving a surprising amount of cultural disapproval. In fact, there is currently a movement among women, well supported by the gender feminists, to inseminate themselves so they can create families "independently of a social father."¹⁹ One has to think of the Murphy Brown debate and how clear it was to conservatives that she was influencing young girls to have children out of wedlock and, on the other hand, to liberals that it was about time television dealt with the issue. Now, however, most seem to agree that Dan Quayle was right that it is time for members of the Hollywood entertainment industry to face the fact that their abandonment of conventional morality—both in their personal lives and in their productions—wreaks havoc among those least able to survive without a strong family.

Whether or not the reader will agree that there are, broadly defined, two strains of feminism, as I have attempted to describe here, most will agree that we are engaged in some kind of a cultural conflict that involves our most basic definitions of Christianity and America. Because it is about ultimates, every combatant is prepared to fight to the end. Those who are not combatants find themselves drawn in, usually from the middle where it is increasingly difficult to remain. We can all find examples of this in the popular and academic culture as well as in the church. While opposing the so-called conservatives—now the equity feminists—liberals have found it difficult to oppose the excesses of gender feminism and have looked befuddled. A bizarre example of this must surely be the debate in the Commission for a New Lutheran Church about where its headquarters should be located. Somehow Minneapolis was not an inclusive city, Milwaukee and Chicago were. More to the point, however, was the strong disagreement between the women of the ALC and the LCA as to whether or not the women's

¹⁹The January/February 1995 *Ms. Magazine* in its section "Health Notes" (p. 19), praises Lisa Safron's *Challenging Conceptions* (Cassell) as "a thorough, useful guide to self-insemination for women who seek to create families 'independently of a social father.'"

organization should be financially independent of the ELCA's treasury, as it had been in the LCA, or interrelated, as it had been in the ALC. The arguments, all between women in the preceding church bodies, created no end of tension and were acrimoniously fought. The LCA contingent argued successfully that theirs was the feminist position and that the ALC's less adversarial tradition, in which women worked in cooperative relation with the other agencies of the church, was not. In reality, both ways merely reflected the organizational traditions of each church body, but one gained the upper hand because it was considered more "inclusive" or "feminist." As Kathryn Marie Olson, whose doctoral thesis examined the rhetoric of the CNLC, observed, those who could label an idea non-inclusive could defeat it.²⁰ No one knew how to counter the arguments successfully. Women from the ALCW chose not to argue because they confused loyalty to women with not arguing with women, thus giving way to those whose position was defined as being the feminist position. As Sommers puts it, "A befuddled liberalism has proved to be fertile soil for the growth of an intolerant gender feminism."²¹

This is especially true of the rhetoric of victimization. My quarrel with most of the talk today in the nattering nineties is how little we understand what can be gained from coming to grips with our human limitations and commitments. Claiming the experience of a victim gives one immediate priority in any argument. People speak to millions on the tube of the most amazingly intimate things in the most inane ways and are thus thought to be oracles of insight. The illusion that an individual would be better if all constraints were cast off or would be wiser without suffering or that all the limitations of creation could be ignored is an illusion that frustrates with its false hopes. Women and men in an amazing variety of situations in life have risen above their circumstances and done marvelous things to advance the cause of Christ. Life is tragic, and it is by understanding my obligations to myself and others that I can grow and realize what it means to be truly human. This in no way justifies my remaining a victim of brutality, but it does show the possibilities of the human spirit when it faces the facts of our mortality. Jane Addams, one of the Christian feminists of the last century, knew the heights and depths of the human spirit, working as she did among the poor at Hull House in Chicago. She understood that life was basically tragic and dominated by compromises between the good of the individual and the good of society. As Addams wrote in 1902, "The collision of interests, each of which has a real moral basis and a right to its own place in life, is bound to be more or less tragic. It is the struggle between two claims, the destruction of either of which would bring ruin to ethical life."²²

²⁰Edgar Trexler, *Anatomy of a Merger: People, Dynamics, and Decisions That Shaped the ELCA* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1991) 261.

²¹Sommers, *Who Stole Feminism?* 134.

²²Jane Addams, "Filial Relations," in *Democracy and Social Ethics* (New York: Macmillan, 1902) 76-77.

IV. PRESENT CHALLENGES FOR WOMEN IN THE ELCA

The present moment is filled, I think, with challenges that now demand our fullest and most humane, and Christian, insights. As a Christian single woman looking at the society around me, I have several urgent concerns that the church, especially the ELCA, should address immediately or we will not survive. First, our Lutheran theology is an important resource for us as we interpret our work. As an evangelist, called to preach and teach the gospel of Jesus Christ, I am wearied by our intense concentration on our own selves. It almost seems as though the devil knows how to keep us from spreading the good news and is occupying us with internecine conflicts that deplete our energies and resources. As a good Lutheran, I cannot subscribe to the idea that appears to be widely held by gender feminists that if women were in power, things would be better for the entire culture. Sin and depravity corrupt anyone in power, as recent suits about sexual harassment in the workplace are making clear.²³ Nor do I approve of a model of independence and individualism, which is not sustainable in our modern life together. As a Lutheran Christian I know that I gain my life when I lose it, I am most free when I am bound, and that my vocation in the world is to serve it. Judith Wallerstein and Sandra Blakeslee, in their book *Second Chances* (1989), have spoken clearly about the costs our children have been made to pay because adults have demanded their right to be free. The church has things to say about these issues, but seems to be reluctant to say them because we have been afraid to be legalists. Meanwhile, our children are left to suffer.

Secondly, our work life is destroying our parenting. One of the great tragedies for children today (and it was caused by economic necessity as both mother and father had to leave the home to work) is the way women in the work force have, of necessity, adopted the male model for work and success. As I am writing this, there is underway an ugly debate about how good a mother is Marcia Clark, the prosecuting attorney in the O. J. Simpson trial. The debate shows evidence of being as divisive and polarizing as the Clarence Thomas/Anita Hill debacle. Susan Cheever has suggested that the question we were not asking, and indeed, had not asked since the sexual revolution of the 1960s, was what was best for the children, and could we restrain our behaviors for their sake?²⁴ This debate, though it promises to be ugly because of its capacity to hurt the principals, is well worth having. Who will raise our children?

Thirdly, I am also deeply concerned that the church help call fathers back to the family and the church, for the sake of the children. This is a national problem that everyone from Dan Quayle to Al Gore is beginning to address. We Lutherans have a relevant theology of vocation that could be used to challenge and teach our fathers how to engage once again with their families. Luther writes wonderful things on the special joys of being a husband and father, and it would be well to

²³"Now Look Who's Taunting. And Who's Suing," *New York Times*, 26 February 1995, 6.

²⁴On ABC's *Nightline* (3 March 1995).

challenge our men to their Christian vocations once again. We have things to say about this that could be helpful to the flourishing of family life today. Men should be encouraged to take their place as leaders in the church and family just as women are. I am quite concerned that our quota system has not made it possible for us to raise up leaders, especially among our laymen, since they are the most expendable when it comes to making the balance between men and women equitable.

Fourthly, and primarily, this is a time for evangelism. Political and cultural leaders are talking of nothing but values these days, urging that they be taught, but few understand that one cannot teach values out of thin air. Values come with religious understandings, where they are taught as a part of what is ultimate. Someone has remarked that Alan Bloom, the writer of the sensationally successful *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987), wanted all the values he learned from his Jewish upbringing without its religious commitments. Our time is, however, ripe for evangelism. Interest has rarely been higher in things religious and spiritual. As the yuppies begin to face the death of their parents and their own retirement, they are beginning to ask ultimate questions: the meaning of life, what happens when we die, what are the limits of my own being. It is a splendid opportunity for us in the church to witness to them of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. That we are focused in on our own organization and our own wounds at this time is regrettable. We have a saving gospel to share with the world, and all our energies should be bent toward that proclamation. It is seemingly impossible, however, to turn our church's resource toward that task, because of all the energy required to tend to our own organization. I spent five years on the Task Force for the Study of Ministry of the new ELCA. We met three times a year for three or four days. During those five years, I had to occupy myself with learning ecclesiology, the dreariest subject in the theological encyclopedia. I was on the committee because I fulfilled a certain quota. I did my work as I was asked to, and, because I felt passionately about it, I fought. Someone had to do the fighting. But I was a long way from the best person to state the case for my reading of Lutheran ecclesiology. Given the results, it was a waste of our time! I can only conclude that the devil was busy making us fulfill all righteousness so that we could not be about the business we would have better been at, namely, evangelism. This happens over and over again in the mainline churches and in the ELCA.

Now the debate among women in the ELCA is joined. Though in the ELCA what could be called the radical feminists have had the power, things can and do change. This August, at the Churchwide Assembly in Minneapolis, the ELCA will celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of women's ordination with a pre-assembly conference. The title, "Breaking Open the Jar: 25 Years of Remembrance and Hope," tends to focus on what women have done and celebrates their work and life within the church. Its focus seems to be on women and making more place for them in the ELCA. Among the objectives for the event announced in a letter seeking support, there is none that mentions the gospel of Jesus Christ and only one activity suggested by the coordinating committee of the anniversary celebration—finding inclusive images for God—mentions the divine one whom women

have been called to serve.²⁵ In other words, it is about the internal organization of the ELCA, not its mission. One can be grateful that the program, which appears to have been planned exclusively by gender feminists, does at least feature a Bible study. On receiving the announcement of the event, several women pastors in the ELCA began wondering why it was that they did not feel interested in such a celebration. As they discussed it and came to some understandings among themselves, they proposed another celebration, one in which they celebrated the past twenty-five years as a rich time, filled with the joy of being able to preach the good news of Christ Jesus. Calling themselves Daughters of the Word, they invited people to an independent celebration of the twenty-five years of women's ordination:

When women began to be ordained in the Lutheran church twenty-five years ago, they came forward with the support of many in the church. Laypeople called them to preach the Word and offer the Sacraments to communities of faith. Faculty members encouraged and challenged them. Their families faced the difficulties and rewards of pastoral ministry beside them. The ordained women of the ELCA have had a variety of experiences in ministry. The cross has been the constant landmark in their journey and God our trustworthy guide. In joy and grief, we are part of 2,000 years of pastoral history. Like all those others, women have been kept alive by the power of the Spirit for the sake of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Join us in a gathering to celebrate the grace of God and the gift of this call.²⁶

This is a time in which some feminist traditions in the ELCA are being publicly challenged by other women who disagree with them. This is only to the good, as Kathleen Jamieson, the dean of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, has urged in a recent book where she encourages women to disagree and enter the intellectual fray, for the good of women.²⁷

In the meantime, it is my hope and prayer that, during this twenty-fifth anniversary year of the ordination of women, everyone in the ELCA, no matter what their political persuasion, will rejoice that we now have potentially twice as many talented people to call into public ministry as well as in the universal calling to all Christians to preach the gospel of "Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations, including [ourselves]" (Rom 1:4-6). ☩

²⁵See the letter to women pastors from Phyllis Anderson, ELCA Division for Ministry, and Susan Miller, of the Planning Committee (12 December 1994).

²⁶"Daughters of the Word: A Celebration of 25 Years of Women's Ordination," advertisement in *Partners Magazine*, March 1995.

²⁷Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Beyond the Double Bind: Women and Leadership* (New York: Oxford University, 1995). In this book, Ms. Jamieson maintains that the idea women should not disagree is "the last refuge of the dishonest or the stupid."