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## Study guide

### For such a time as this

*Learning, speaking and doing gender justice in the church*

By Robert C. Blezard

Our society has made strides in gender equality over the last 50 years, but the #MeToo movement and the emerging struggle over LGBTQ rights have helped reveal just how much more work needs to be done. As Lutheran Christians, we have a clear viewpoint and a role to play. The ELCA's draft social statement on women and justice provides excellent analysis and a map for the journey forward.

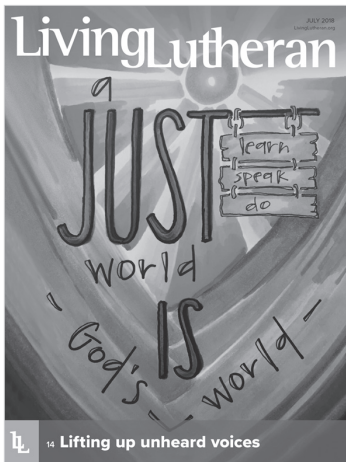
#### Exercise 1: *Imago Dei*

A tenet of the Christian faith holds that all people are created *imago Dei*—in the image of God. The concept is expressed in Genesis 1:27: “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.”

- What does it mean that we are made in the image of God?
- Do *all* people reflect the image of God? Any exceptions? Why or why not? What does Genesis 1:27 say?
- Historically, has the Christian church treated women and men as equal images of God? Explain. In what ways have women been treated as lesser images of God? Explain. Explain how things are better or worse today.
- Are members of the LGBTQ community treated as equal reflectors of the image of God as their heterosexual brothers and sisters? Explain. Why is this not right?
- The ELCA's draft social statement on women and justice asserts: “Many Christians, in the past and still today, interpret the Genesis creation stories to support the belief that females are secondary to males and more sinful than males” (lines 361-363). Do you agree? Why or why not? What do you observe in your life, our culture and our church?
- How can Christians help promote the idea that all people, regardless of gender, are made in the image of God?

#### Exercise 2: “No longer male or female”

Christians revere Paul's teaching in Galatians 3:28: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” Yet different groups and individuals have interpreted it differently when it comes to gender roles.



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- Does Paul mean that men and women lose their sexual identity? What do you think he means?
- Is our gender of any consequence when it comes to God's love for us? Does it mean anything for our ability to be a disciple? For our salvation?
- How well has the Christian church lived out this teaching? Have men and women been treated equally and fairly? How are we doing now? How about the ELCA?
- The gender identity categories of LGBTQ weren't around in Paul's day, but wouldn't his teaching on gender apply to them today? Why or why not?
- How is this a women and justice issue?

### Exercise 3: "A man's world"

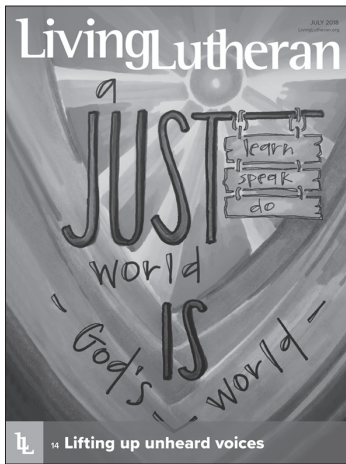
The old saying goes, "It's a man's world." Was it then? Is it now? Discuss:

- When did you first hear this expression? What did it mean then? At that time, what made it "a man's world"? What were the cultural powers and privileges ascribed to men at that time in such areas as employment, education, family, politics, power, social interaction, etc.?
- Simultaneously, what did this expression say about the condition of women back then? In what ways was it *not* a women's world? What were the corresponding roles afforded to women in such areas as employment, education, family, politics, power, social interaction, etc.?
- How have things changed for women in the last 50 years in the areas mentioned above? In what ways is it not quite as accurate to say, "It's a man's world"? What evidence can you think of?
- In what ways are men still privileged over women? What evidence supports this view?
- As far as women have come, how far do they still have to go? What outcomes would you like to see for our daughters or granddaughters as they grow?
- How and why is this an issue of women and justice?

### Exercise 4: "A long way, baby"

From 1968 to 1990, Virginia Slims cigarettes were marketed to women with the slogan "You've come a long way, baby!" The ad was an acknowledgment that social conditions were, indeed, changing for North American women. But how, and by how much?

- The slogan uses the word "baby" to refer to women. What are the implications? Why is it demeaning to refer to a woman as "baby"? If the ad were to run today, what would be the reaction to the use of the



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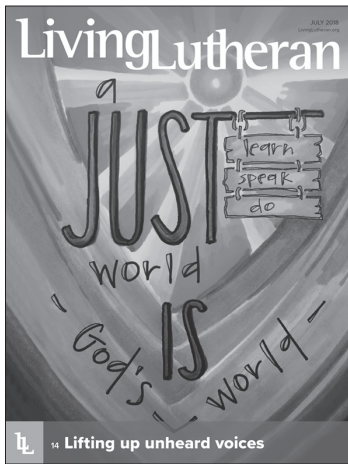
word? And what does that say about how much things have changed for women?

- In your lifetime, how have you seen things change for women? What advances have you witnessed in employment, politics, education, family and other important areas? What do you think of these changes? Which were positive? Which were negative?
- How far do women have to go? What still needs to be changed?
- Even as conditions have improved for women in general, have they improved consistently across the board for all women? How or how not?
- In what ways have improvements in the condition of women bypassed African American, Latina, Native American, Asian and other women of color? How? Why? What do you see? What has to change for them to catch up?
- In what ways have improvements in the condition of women not applied to those who are lesbian, bisexual or transgender? How? Why? What do you observe? What needs to be changed?
- When it comes to improvement in social standing and conditions, have women who are white and heterosexual gained the most? Why or why not?
- How and why is this an issue of women and justice?

### Exercise 5: #MeToo

The #MeToo cases of Harvey Weinstein, Bill O'Reilly, Eric Schneiderman and other prominent men in the fields of entertainment, business and politics has, at last, shed light on long-standing sex abuse of women.

- Decades before Harvey Weinstein's misdeeds came to light, the phrase "casting couch" had been used to describe Hollywood's culture of sex-for-work. How have you heard the phrase used? What does it mean? What does the phrase's common usage in our language indicate?
- With improvements in women's equality, rights and power, did you think the "casting couch" culture was a thing of the past? Explain.
- In what ways does the #MeToo movement signal that the "casting couch" culture is still around? That it's not limited to Hollywood?
- Did the #MeToo movement signal a sudden awareness of the sex-for-work culture? Or is it more a signal that our society now finds it unacceptable?
- What does the #MeToo movement's sudden rise say about the struggle women still face in employment and other areas?
- Are things moving in the right direction? How can people of God help?



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- How and why is this an issue of women and justice?

### **Exercise 6: Domestic violence**

Statistics show that most domestic violence takes place by men against women. The Center for Family Justice ([centerforfamilyjustice.org](http://centerforfamilyjustice.org)) reports the following facts:

- On average, three women are killed by a current or former intimate partner each day in the U.S. (Bureau of Justice Statistics).
- One in 4 women have experienced severe physical violence by an intimate partner (National Intimate Partner & Sexual Violence Survey).
- Sixty-six percent of female stalking victims are stalked by a current or former intimate partner (National Stalking Resource Center).
- Domestic violence costs more than \$8.3 billion a year in medical care, mental health services and lost productivity at companies (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention).
- More than 15 million children witness domestic violence each year in the U.S. (*Journal of Family Psychology*).
- In the U.S., 3,500 to 4,000 children witness fatal family violence annually (National Task Force on Children Exposed to Violence).

Discuss:

- How has domestic violence emerged as an issue in your community or congregation? How has your community or congregation dealt with it? Has that response been adequate? How could it be better?
- What does the prevalence of domestic violence say about the condition of women and girls in the U.S.? The condition of men?
- Along with other community and social issues, how should domestic violence be addressed by the church? Why? What could your congregation do to assist victims? How could it raise awareness of the issues? (For action: Make a list of proposals for your congregation council or pastor.)
- How is domestic violence an issue of women and justice?

### **Exercise 7: Rape culture**

The draft social statement on women and justice defines rape culture as “an environment in which the objectification and assault of human bodies is normalized and tolerated, particularly in a sexual way. Rape culture primarily harms women and girls” (page 58).

- To what degree do you think a rape culture exists in the U.S.? Explain. What evidence can you point to?
- Images of women in sexually provocative clothing, poses and situa-

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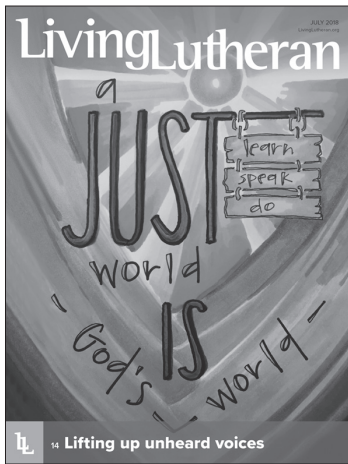
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tions are everywhere in our culture—billboards and other advertising media, film, TV, the internet and print. Why is this so? What does it say about our culture’s objectification of women as sex objects? How does this diminish the dignity and humanity of women and girls? How does this not only point to but also reinforce rape culture?

- What does the prevalence of the #MeToo movement, the statistics of domestic violence, date rape and other indicators say about rape culture in the U.S.?
- How is rape culture related to male privilege?
- What can the church do to help? Why is it important that we try?

### **Exercise 8: Patriarchy**

The draft social statement on women and justice describes the harmful effects of patriarchy on our culture. It defines patriarchy this way (page 58): *The social, institutional, legal, political, educational, economic, religious and interpersonal systems of society that benefit men and the interests of men with status and power. While all people within a patriarchal system participate in it, the system functions with men at the center. This means that, sometimes unconsciously, people participate in systems that control and oppress people who do not fit society’s ideas of maleness and masculinity.*

Despite changes that have elevated the status of women in the last 50 years, what evidence do you see that we are still a largely patriarchal culture? In addressing this question, consider the following facts:

- Women earn 82 percent of what men do (Pew Research Center).
- Only 52 women have ever served in the U.S. Senate, including 23 currently in office. They make up 23 percent of the current Senate (Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers University).
- Of 435 U.S. representatives, only 84 (19.5 percent) are women (Eagleton Institute).
- The U.S. has never had a female president or vice president.
- In 2018, only 24 of the chief executive officers on the Fortune 500 are women. They make up 5 percent (*Fortune* magazine).
- The 2016 poverty rate for female-headed households was 26.6 percent—five times that of married-couple-headed households (5.1 percent) and double that of male-headed households (13.1 percent) (U.S. Census Bureau).

As people of God, what can we do to help? How can we? How should we?

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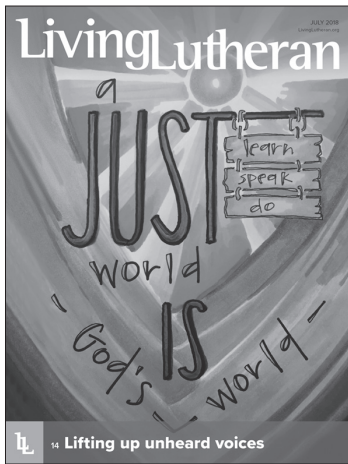
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### About the study guide author:

#### Rob Blezard

is an assistant to the bishop in the Lower Susquehanna Synod.



He holds degrees from Boston University School of Theology and the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg (Pa).

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### Exercise 9: Holy listening

- Does our culture listen to the stories of women and LGBTQ people who are harmed by patriarchy and male privilege? Why or why not?
- Do women and LGBTQ people feel safe talking about how they have been harmed? Why or why not? What can we do to change the dynamic?
- Does your congregation listen to their stories? How can your congregation do better? How can you or your study group lead the way?
- How can you start with your own social circle or your study group?

# For such a time as this

## Learning, speaking and doing gender justice in the church

Text by Meghan Johnston Aelabouni

Illustrations by Vonda Drees

In the biblical story of Esther, a young woman called by God “for such a time as this” uses her voice and influence to seek justice for her people. This ancient text echoes today in the #MeToo movement, exposing histories of gender-based exploitation and assault; in statistics that reveal continued inequalities between women and men worldwide; and in discussions about the meaning of gender and sexuality in human society—and in the church.

Since last November, ELCA members have been gathering to read and discuss a draft of the church’s social statement on women and justice. Through prayer, study and conversation, Lutherans have pondered what it means to pursue justice for women—and all genders—in the church and the world, as Christians called “for such a time as this.”

Here we introduce some of the many Lutherans who engage in *learning, speaking* and *doing* gender justice in their daily vocations. Their callings may differ, but they share a common foundation: the conviction that all people are made in God’s image and are equal in God’s eyes; that our identity in Christ, “neither male nor female,” invalidates patriarchal structures that create power imbalances between genders; and that God’s intention for the world is greater freedom for women, leading to greater freedom for all.

## LEARNING JUSTICE:

### Holy conversations

Amy Marga, associate professor of systematic theology at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minn., started Feminist Café as an informal student reading and discussion group for feminist theology. Three years later, Marga has learned as much from her students as she has shared, including an understanding that sex and gender are much more varied, and less absolute, than the language of “male and female” allows.

“The first step toward justice is recognizing that humanity is made in different ways,” she said. “If we

take the *imago dei* (image of God) seriously ... how do we do justice to the image of God in people?”

Marga also finds support for gender justice in the theology of Lutheran vocation: “We are created *and* called by God” with many gifts. Still, at times the church “is not good at recognizing ‘many gifts,’ ” Marga acknowledged. “We haven’t recognized women’s, gay men’s or trans [people’s] gifts. God has been doing something new in our church, but do we have eyes to see it?”

For Marga, gender justice involves recognizing God’s abundance in “what people bring to the table. No one is taking away something from us. If we recognize other people’s gifts, it’s not like our gifts don’t matter.”

Bringing all gifts to the table is likewise the goal of Grady St. Dennis, chaplain and director of church relations at Gustavus Adolphus College, St. Peter, Minn. For 15 years, Gustavus has facilitated a clergy wellness program called Pastor-2-Pastor that brings rostered ministers together for small-group learning and renewal. Last fall’s gathering, “Faith, Sexism and Justice,” used the ELCA social statement draft as a conversational “road map” and inspired a follow-up gathering focused on domestic violence.

In his work with students, faculty and staff, and the St. Peter community, St. Dennis has learned that “identity matters. ... We’re missing out when people can’t share all of who they are.” Gender justice means “equity in one area allowing all to flourish ... [and] it’s as much good news for young men as young women,” he affirmed.

Jim Arends, bishop of the La Crosse Area Synod, has also experienced the flourishing that can occur in holy conversations between congregations and rostered ministers seeking calls. “Gender justice means fairness, working at things as if we’re all the same qualified people, because we are,” he said.

Arends and synod staff strive to build credibility with congregations so call committees can trust they are being presented with the best candidates for their ministries, regardless of gender or sexuality. In

God has been doing  
something new  
in our new  
church!

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return, congregations are expected to interview all candidates. The goal is “to put an individual person in front of you, as opposed to [putting] your hang-ups in front of you,” he explained.

It’s a process that can lead to new possibilities—as it did for Becky Goche, the first openly lesbian pastor called to English Lutheran Church in La Crosse, Wis. Goche, a married second-career pastor, expected to wait longer to receive a first call, knowing that many congregations are unwilling or reluctant to consider LGBTQIA+ pastors and deacons. The synod’s support affirmed her call and gifts, which helped congregants look beyond their preconceptions. This made gender justice as simple and profound as the conversations that led to Goche living out her calling, with the support and partnership of her congregation.

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## SPEAKING JUSTICE:

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### Lifting up unheard voices

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Some Lutherans find that their calling lies in amplifying voices often unheard in places of power.

“Our mission is to bring about healing and wholeness in church, society and the world ... and we help provide resources for women to live that out,” said Linda Post Bushkofsky, Women of the ELCA executive director ([womenoftheelca.org](http://womenoftheelca.org)). “People all over the world download and use” the Bible studies, devotional and educational materials, and other resources the organization makes freely available to the church in print and online, she said.

Many of the resources intentionally focus on racism and other social concerns alongside gender. “Women who are from marginalized communities are disproportionately affected by injustice,” said Jennifer DeLeon, Women of the ELCA director for justice.

Intersectional justice works to address the overlapping challenges faced by women who contend with racism, poverty, hunger and disability, as well as sexism. “We’re not all free if only some of us are free,” Bushkofsky added.

Amy Reumann, director of ELCA Advocacy ([elca.org/advocacy](http://elca.org/advocacy)), also finds that freedom inspires her work. “Our gendered selves are all equal and marvelously cherished and loved by God ... so as a church, we name and dismantle sexism and patriarchy, and seek to support more life-giving ways” of being, she said.

In 14 state public policy offices nationwide, including Washington, D.C., ELCA Advocacy works on a range of issues to ensure “the full participation of women and all genders in decision-making,

so that their realities, needs and experience are fully taken into account in the formation of laws, regulations and policies,” according to its materials.

ELCA social statements provide Advocacy staff with “tools and language to take into our work ... [so we are] not just speaking for, but speaking *with*” the church as a whole—especially the people for whom it advocates, Reumann said.

As program director for the Lutheran Office for World Community, a joint ministry of the ELCA and the Lutheran World Federation that represents Lutherans at the United Nations, Christine Mangale knows from experience what it means for the church to empower women. She grew up in the Kenya Evangelical Lutheran Church and came to the U.S. in 2009 through an ELCA scholarship. Today, she arranges for global Lutherans to speak at the U.N. to address human rights and other issues to ensure that women and girls—and men and boys—receive equal rights and dignity worldwide.

“Our Bible ... and our faith affirm that we are all God’s children [and that] women are equal and made in the image of God,” Mangale said. “[Therefore, gender justice also means identifying the gaps where] women are lacking access to quality education, equal work and pay, [and] places of decision-making.”

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## DOING JUSTICE:

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### From the kitchen table to the world

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Gender justice also finds expression in “doing justice” by making a material difference in the lives of people of all genders.

For Kara Haug, founder of Grace Unbound ([graceunbound.com](http://graceunbound.com)), this work takes the form of comprehensive sexual health education that helps children, youth and adults understand their bodies and sexuality without shame.

Haug, a member of St. John Lutheran Church, Sacramento, Calif., and a graduate of Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, Berkeley, Calif., felt called to bridge her faith and theological training with sexual health education after years of working with youth in outdoor ministry, youth ministry and foster care. “I recognized the needs of the youth in yearning for information about their bodies and relationships,” she recalled.

Through Grace Unbound, Haug teaches workshops on sexual health and gender identity in congregations and schools, and leads “table talk sessions” that gather families for frank, caring discussion. She finds that, despite some initial awkwardness, people are grateful for opportunities

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to connect their faith to the whole of their lives—body and sexuality included.

“All of us wonder if we are OK. We want to be loved, seen, heard and cared for,” Haug said. “That is where we need to start in ministry.”

This is also the starting place for the Healing Center ([thehealingcenterny.org](http://thehealingcenterny.org)), an ELCA social ministry housed at Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Brooklyn, N.Y., that offers holistic support for survivors of domestic abuse and their families, as well as programs of education and awareness about gender-based and relationship violence. Antonia Clemente, founder and executive director, sits on the Gender Justice Task Force for the City of New York, where, as an ELCA member, she said she is proud to be able to say she belongs to a church addressing this at the national level.

Still, Clemente is concerned that many congregations are reluctant to address issues of domestic violence despite its prevalence in communities and in the church itself. Part of the church’s responsibility, she believes, is repentance for the ways it has enabled or overlooked sexism and gender injustice. “Without repentance, how can there be reconciliation? But repentance means support,” she said.

The Healing Center seeks to offer that support—and after nearly two decades of ministry, Clemente sees it as “a living testimony of God’s grace.”

The ELCA International Leaders Program has also chosen in recent years to focus more intentionally on gender justice. The program has provided scholarships to members of global companion churches ever since the ELCA was formed. But “after 25 years of administering the scholarship awards, we found that only one-third had been given to women,” said Tammy Jackson, program director. The problem wasn’t that female applicants were unqualified, but that so few of them applied in the first place.

“We knew there were women out there who wanted to receive more education and access to training and deserved to have better futures—and we were inspired and compelled to create a track for women to address the deficit we had been experiencing,” Jackson said.


That track is the ELCA International Women Leaders initiative, part of the Campaign for the ELCA ([elca.org/campaign](http://elca.org/campaign)), which since 2015 has offered scholarships to women from companion churches to complete undergraduate or seminary degrees at ELCA schools. Currently supporting 26 young women, the initiative has also increased women’s participation in the scholarship program

as a whole; in 2017, for the first time, more than 50 percent of the scholarships were granted to women.

The desire to accompany and empower global women also led the International Leaders Program to create the weeklong Wittenberg seminars for women who can’t commit to a formal four-year degree program. From 2014 to 2017, 100 women gathered to focus on the legacy of the women of the Reformation. This fall, the next generation of seminars will launch in Hyderabad, India, focused on action for gender justice, cross-cultural learning and leadership development.

Some women from the seminars may go on to pursue International Leaders Program scholarships; many more will return to their communities inspired and equipped to lead.

Ultimately, an ELCA social statement on women and justice will shape the gender justice work the church does on a national level. But it will also reverberate beyond the walls of the church. Adopting a social statement on gender justice would create “a huge opportunity for the church to be a public witness in the age of #MeToo,” Bushkofsky said.

Clemente agreed: “This is the moment. This is the time. ... A just world is God’s world ... [and] to do justice, to be there, to walk with people—that’s our call.” 

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Find out more about the process for the ELCA’s social statements by visiting [livinglutheran.org](http://livinglutheran.org) and searching for “social statements.”

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Learn about the work and resources of the ELCA’s Justice for Women program, which taps into Lutheran theological roots to address gender justice, at [elca.org/justiceforwomen](http://elca.org/justiceforwomen).

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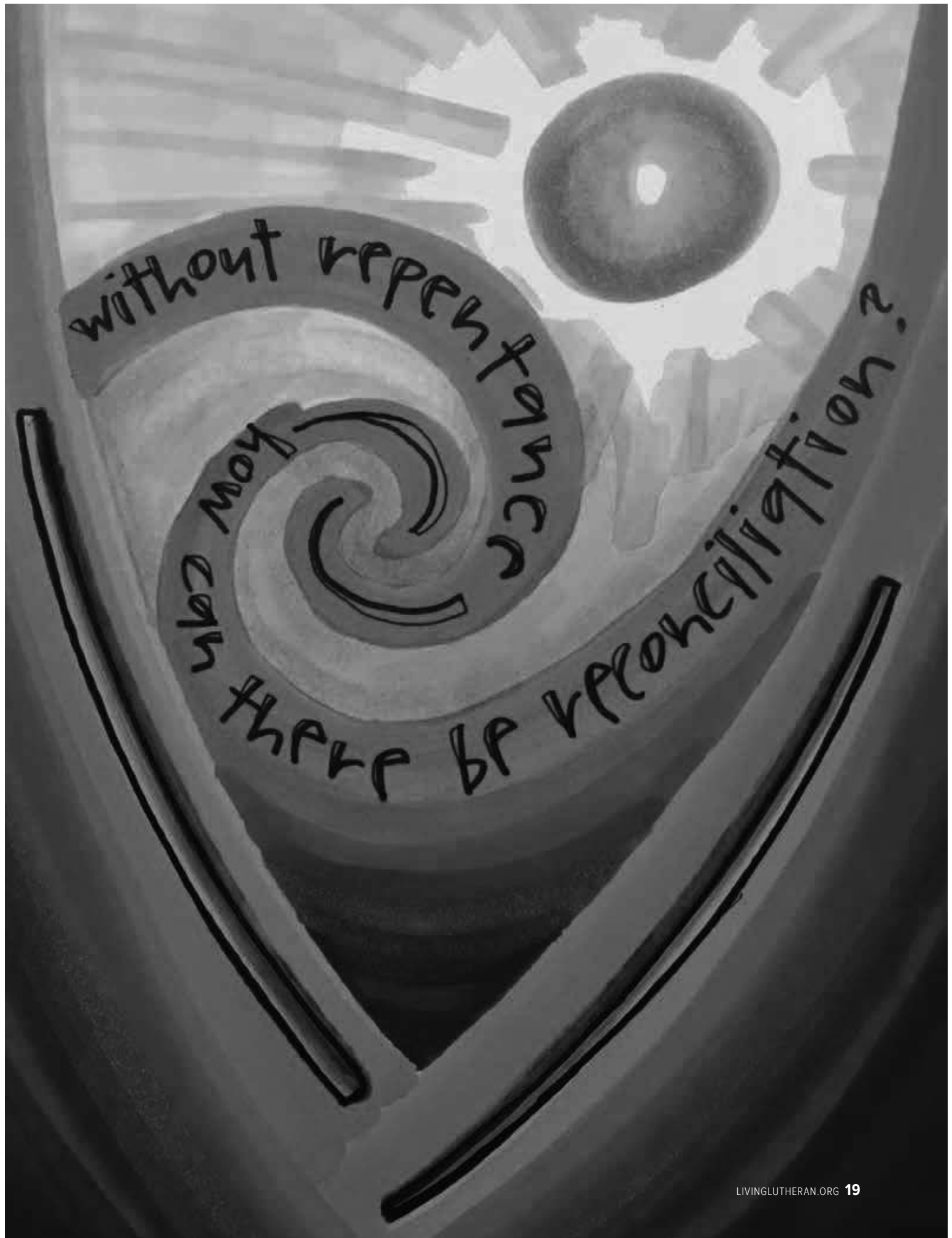
To read and respond to the “Draft Social Statement on Women and Justice,” go to [elca.org/womenandjustice](http://elca.org/womenandjustice). The task force will read and consider all responses submitted by Sept. 30.

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Download a study guide at [livinglutheran.org](http://livinglutheran.org) by clicking on the “Spiritual practices & resources” tab.



**Meghan Johnston Aelabouni** is an ELCA pastor studying full time for her doctorate. She and her family live in Fort Collins, Colo.



without repentance

How can

there be reconciliation?