



# GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

## What Steps Should The Church Take?

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### Abby's Story

I was 20 years old when I was raped. I was a sophomore in college, and I had never thought about sexual violence. Things like that didn't happen to girls who followed the rules. I didn't do anything out of the ordinary the night it happened. A group of friends came back to my apartment to watch a movie after having spent the evening at a bar downtown. The boy who raped me was one those friends. I never felt like I was in danger until it was too late, until he was on top of me, too heavy for me to move, and too intoxicated for me to reason with. It was sudden and startling, and I didn't know what to do. So I did nothing. I didn't yell after I realized my pleas were ignored, after I realized he would not listen to me. My body froze and I blacked out. Afterwards, my friends played off what had happened like it was a hook up that I was embarrassed about. I was confused about what had occurred, so I followed their lead and tried to laugh along with them. For a while I did. I buried it and attempted to write it off as "normal". But the depression came and the shame and guilt were overwhelming. I covered it up with alcohol and self-mutilation. It wasn't until 4 years after my rape, after I left college and started a new life that I finally sought treatment for my trauma. Part of my healing came from publicly writing about my rape. It was a way to reclaim my power, to say that I had done nothing wrong, to move beyond the shame that comes with the territory of staying silent. There was also the realization that I was not alone in what happened to me, and I knew that my life would be dedicated to fighting against sexual assault and gender-based violence. Today, I work as a victim advocate at a sexual assault center. My hope is that gender-based violence will one day no longer be commonplace and no one will be ashamed of her or his story.

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### An American Tragedy

Gender-based violence continues to devastate American people and communities. Public agencies including the White House Council on Women and Girls and the Centers for Disease



Control as well as non-governmental women's advocacy organizations and university research centers report that while violent and family crime statistics have declined since the 1980s, the incidence of gender-based violence continues to tragically harm many lives and damage our social fabric.

The nation mourns the 9/11 deaths of innocent victims and military service members who lost their lives in the wars of the 21st century's first decade, approximately 9,500 people. Yet over that same time

span, FBI statistics report that husbands and boyfriends killed 11,766 American women in domestic violence related incidents.

The CDC National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence 2010 Survey reports that more than 1 in 3 women (35.6%) and more than 1 in 4 men (28.5%) in the United States have experienced rape, physical violence and/or stalking by an intimate partner in their lifetime. Church members are included in these statistics. Government and private organizations report that 50% or more gender-based violence victims do not report being assaulted. Research also indicates that nonprofit rape crisis center staff and financial resources are insufficient to address the problem. Many victims go without help.

Prompted by the recommendation of the ELCA Task Force on Women and Justice: One in Christ, the ELCA Church Council approved a social message on gender-based violence in 2015. The ELCA is committed to helping Lutherans understand and actively address this tragedy. Similar to the Gospel of John's account where Jesus blessed a few loaves and fish and fed the 5,000, God can multiply the church's gifts and assets to bring healing and restoration to many and make society safer. One way for congregations to reflect on the ELCA social message is to use this deliberative dialogue resource.



## FACTS

- 38 million American women have experienced intimate partner violence. (*CDC-NISVS*)
- Over 22 million women in the U.S. have been raped in their lifetimes. (*CDC-NISVS*)
- More than 1 in 3 women (35.6%) and more than 1 in 4 men (28.5%) in the United States have experienced rape, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner in their lifetime. (*CDC*)
- 1 in 6 men have been through abusive sexual experiences before reaching adulthood. (*RAINN*)
- More than 79.6% of female victims were raped or sexually assaulted before age 25. (*CDC*)
- 43% of lesbian and bisexual women and 30% of gay and bisexual men have experienced at least one form of sexual assault. (*CDC*)
- The cost of gender-based violence against women — medical and mental health care — is estimated to be \$5.8 billion. (*CDC*)
- One in 5 women and 1 in 16 men are sexually assaulted in college. (*National Sexual Violence Resource Center*)
- Almost 10% of high school students are victims of dating violence each year. (*CDC-NISVS*)
- Victims of sexual assault are 3 times more likely to experience depression, 6 times more likely to experience PTSD, and 14 times more likely to abuse alcohol. (*RAINN*)

## A Social Message on Gender-based Violence

In *A Social Message on Gender-based Violence*, the writers cite the Biblical story where King David does nothing about his son Amnon's rape of his half-sister Tamar. He fails to hold his son accountable and his and others' silence results in Tamar becoming "a desolate woman." (II Samuel 13:1-33)

"Scripture is clear that God never ceased loving King David. Many times, however, it shows how much God desperately wanted him to do the right thing. Because God loved him, God sent prophets to call him to account and change his ways.

In the same way, God related to the people Israel. God's steadfast mercy endured their failures, but out of that same love, God continually confronted and called them to do good for all people, especially people who are harmed, like Tamar. The story of Tamar, Amnon and David calls God's people today to respond to gender-based violence.

Gender-based violence is a global tragedy that affects millions. As Christ's church, we lament the suffering and confess collective and individual complicities in church and society. The complex factors that contribute to and sustain the prevalence of this sin are deeply woven into collective and individual lives.

As a member of Christ's body, ELCA Lutherans share in the brokenness and judgment, even while we proclaim God loves and seeks to restore and heal through the power of the Holy Spirit. Like Tamar, this church in this message is speaking courageously against gender-based violence. Like King David, this church is also beloved by God and called to confront the problem — to hear God's call to provide care, to become educated, to create accountability, and to advocate — to become allies in the efforts to create safe and healthy communities." (*A Gender-based Violence Social Message, ELCA, 2015*)

## Types of Gender-based Violence

Gender-based violence can include sexual and other physical assault, including murder; rape; sexual harassment; sexual, physical, and verbal abuse; stalking; intimate relationship violence regardless of gender; elder abuse or child abuse; human trafficking for sex; pornography; and violence during armed conflict. Intimate partner violence, domestic violence, sexual assault, and rape are related terms used to describe gender-based violence (GBV).



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## Deliberative Dialogue

Deliberative dialogue offers congregations a fresh approach to civil discourse. While other communication formats are often used to inform citizens, such as debate or focused discussions, deliberative dialogue is not competitive, nor is it a discussion solely focused on acquiring knowledge. Deliberative dialogue helps people reflect on reliable information about an issue, share their personal opinions, and make some choices. How do forums work?

**Convening:** A sponsor brings 10-20 people together with different ideas and backgrounds to form an inclusive group of forum participants.

**Moderation:** Impartial moderators guide the dialogue, keep time, and record notes. They do not share their opinions but ensure that participants' diverse thoughts are heard and recorded.

**Personal Stake:** Prior to engaging in dialogue about the issue, everyone is given the opportunity to share why the issue is important to them. "What makes this issue real for us?"

**Deliberation:** The forum continues with equal time, perhaps 20 minutes given to each of three distinct approaches to address the issue. Participants weigh specific action ideas, potential consequences and roadblocks.

**Agreement:** The final 20-minute portion of the dialogue focuses on agreement. The moderator will ask: Which ideas generated some agreement? Did we find any common ground? Are there areas where we could not agree and why? Were we missing key people or perspectives in our group?

**Sharing Findings:** The process concludes by determining additional opportunities for dialogue or ways to convey the group's action choices and recommendations to decision makers.

## Gender-based Violence Forum

This deliberative dialogue guide is the result of several conversations with staff members in the ELCA Office of the Presiding Bishop who oversee social statement and message writing. This resource is NOT an authorized document of the ELCA; rather it is a contribution to the church's faithful ministry to help Lutherans speak to challenging public issues. This effort to engage congregations in deliberative forums is part of a Kettering Foundation research project: Religious Organizations and Community Building. Historically, churches helped people develop the democratic skills of listening, speaking, seeking common ground, and contributing to the common good of their communities. How do we do this today?

Ready to get started? Before examining different approaches to how congregations might respond to gender-based violence, we need to take a few moments to share from our hearts. Why did you come to the forum? How is this issue real for you? What do you hope to come away with?



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***“Deliberative dialogue offers congregations a fresh approach to civil discourse.”***

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## FORUM COVENANT

- Be in prayer and seek the Spirit's guidance.
- Everyone is encouraged to participate.
- Listen to understand.
- Disagree respectfully with others' ideas.
- Give equal time and focus to each approach.
- Move toward greater mutual understanding of the issue.
- Endeavor to seek agreement and make some choices on possible actions.

## Dear Abby,

### Where can we find reliable information about gender-based violence?

There are a number of public and private organizations focused on ending sexual assault and gender-based violence. RAINN is a respected anti-sexual assault organization. They advocate for children, women, men, military personnel, and college students. Not Alone is a new White House approach at fighting gender based violence within the education system. Tell My Daughters is a new grassroots organization focused on allowing survivors to tell their stories in a safe setting in order to build community and re-establish their own sense of worth. They also provide resources for victims and their families. Local sexual assault and child advocacy centers provide resources and advice.

## Approach #1 What do we need to learn?

“Let the wise hear and increase in learning, and the one who understands obtain guidance.” Proverbs 1:5

Lutherans experience gender-based violence in their homes, workplaces, and educational institutions, but it is a very hard subject to discuss. It is risky to encounter friends, family members, and our own pain. This first approach seeks to understand the breadth and depth of a national and global tragedy.

While we learn from one another in this forum, it is important to realize that we are not qualified to do therapy; rather, we gather to get a sense of a complex social problem and consider how God might use the church for healing and restoration.

This approach focuses on exploring the concerns Lutherans have for violence against women, children, and men in their respective communities. How can the church carefully and faithfully open a dialogue about this issue?

While women and girls make up the vast majority of victims, boys and men, and especially gay, lesbian and gender non-conforming people are targets for abuse. As a church of all God's children, are we aware of how other members of the Body of Christ are affected by verbal abuse and physical violence?



### Possible Actions

- Engage in education through dialogue, analysis, and careful study of the social and religious factors that contribute to various forms of gender-based violence.
- Provide a safe space for survivors of sexual assault to share their experiences.
- Include the issue of violence against women and of gender-based violence more broadly in sermons, catechetical instruction, and theological curricula.
- Invite local resource people to share secular theories and practices to address gender-based violence.
- Support and teach about healthy relationships, including sexual relationships.
- Are there other ways to promote understanding?

### Potential Roadblocks

- People might be resistant to discussing such a sensitive subject.
- Sharing personal details might compromise the privacy of survivors.
- Some would argue that the church should avoid teaching such a complex issue.
- Some believers object to secular theories that do not recognize the value of religion.
- There are those who contend that the church is not a place for psychology and sexuality education.

## Approach #2

### What do we feel compelled to do as a congregation?

“Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.” James 3:13

This second approach requires dialogue about practical ideas for acting on what we know to be true. Gender-based violence affects women, girls, men, and boys. What might the congregation do? Are there people with particular gifts to help? In some cases, the congregation might feel called to support victims or survivors.

Yet another focus might be prevention and working with people who would benefit from help to resist committing acts of gender-based violence. What are the possibilities and limits of the church’s ministry relative to gender-based violence?



### Possible Actions

- Make certain pastors and church leaders know where to refer people who need immediate help.
- Put in place and enforce congregational policies and practices that promote safe and healthy congregations.
- Provide victims’ support and violence prevention training for staff members.
- Provide safe spaces for people to share their experiences of being victimized.
- Dedicate an annual focus time for gender-based violence prevention.
- Provide a rehabilitation program for men prone to or convicted of violence against women.
- What other ideas do you have?

### Potential Roadblocks

- Some communities have limited or no resources for referrals.
- Policies do not guarantee compliance.
- The cost of training might be prohibitive.
- Confidentiality could easily be compromised and a victim’s privacy damaged.
- Some would argue that prevention requires more time and attention.
- Some church members believe the church is not equipped to handle such a difficult responsibility.

### Dear Abby,

**I pray, we pray all the time for unnamed people who suffer in many ways. I know prayer is powerful, but is there something more I can do to help victims or prevent a violent act?**

One of the most important things you and your congregation can do is listen to victims if they are willing to talk about what happened to them. Many times, victims suffer alone because they are afraid of judgment and because they are ashamed. Make sure they know the church is a safe place and remind them that they are not at fault for anything that has happened. You can also speak out against gender-based violence in your daily life by challenging ideas that perpetuate objectification and assault. Speak up when offensive attitudes and jokes are being shared that reinforce violence and inequality. Public awareness is essential in fighting archaic notions of gender norms.

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***“Gender-based violence is a global travesty that affects millions.”***

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## Dear Abby,

### How can we best collaborate with elected officials?

Education is key when it comes to combatting gender-based violence. If the mindset is shifted at a young age, the generations to come will grow up knowing that gender-based violence is unacceptable.

Senator Tim Kaine (D-Va) introduced the Teach Safe Relationships Act, S-355 this year in the U.S. Congress. If the bill passes, it would ensure that schools across the United States teach students to recognize abusive relationships, violence and harassment. These classes would also ensure students learn appropriate behaviors to counteract these attitudes, in addition to sex education currently in place within the local school systems.

It is always helpful to lobby local, state and federal elected officials with letters, phone calls, and visits about pending legislation.

## Approach #3 How might we advocate government and other officials?

Jesus preached in the synagogue, “The Spirit of the Lord in upon me, because he anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed.”

*Luke 4:17*



How might the church take the gospel into the world and apply it to the reality of gender-based violence? Beyond the church's doors, to whom should the people speak? This third approach is tough, but it reflects the ministry to which Christ calls us. The Church has a prophetic as well as a pastoral vision to exercise in society and therefore acts as a corporate citizen. What role might the church play in contributing to the development of laws and practices? How might we advocate policies designed to reduce gender-based violence among leaders in business, education institutions, athletic organizations, the military, and the media? With which organizations might the church collaborate?

### Possible Actions

- Collaborate with local experts in care and advocacy in order to respond to survivors' needs.
- Understand and uphold the ELCA Vision and Expectations document.
- Advocate accountability measures in area universities relative to rape and exploitation of women.
- Write letters to or dialogue with elected officials at all government levels regarding laws and practices.
- Promote and help fund and develop organizations and facilities in support of domestic and gender-based violence victims.
- Organize groups in church and society to work against sexism and violence.
- What other advocacy measures come to mind?

### Potential Roadblocks

- Community agencies might be resistant to working with faith communities.
- Many Lutherans are not familiar with the ELCA Vision and Expectations document.
- Universities might be uncomfortable with ideas and advocacy from people outside the institution.
- Elected officials might have other priorities.
- Many people worry that the church has limited funds.
- Some might simply not know where to start to address the epidemic of gender-based violence.



## Agreement?

After deliberating through each of the approaches and considering many of the specific actions and corresponding roadblocks, the goal is to find common thoughts. This is the conversation where the group transitions from sharing personal opinions to seeking agreement on what can be done as a congregation about gender-based violence. The goal is to consider next steps. Your group might want to spend additional time with more dialogue partners.

1. **What did we accomplish?**
2. **Can we detect any shared sense of direction or any agreement?**
3. **What did you hear the group saying about tensions in this issue?**
4. **Are there any particular values we hold in common?**
5. **Are there values that reflect disagreement or opposition?**
6. **What do we still need to talk about?**
7. **Who else needs to be here? What voices were missing?**
8. **How can we use what we learned from participating in the forum?**

## After the Forum

Thank you for participating in the deliberative forum. There is one more thing we ask of you. We would appreciate participants completing a post-forum survey by typing in the following address on your smart phone, tablet, or computer. Paper surveys are also available. Please take a few minutes before departing to complete the survey.

<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/7DWXGQX>

**The survey has two purposes.**

- 1) We are interested in your forum experience.
- 2) We would like to know your thoughts about using the deliberative dialogue process to discuss future ELCA teaching documents. Thank you for contributing your thoughts.

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## HELPFUL RESOURCES

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention  
National Intimate Partners and Sexual Violence  
Survey 2010

<http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/nisvs/>

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

<http://www.elca.org/Resources/Justice-for-Women>

Not Alone - An official website of the  
United States Government

[www.notalone.gov](http://www.notalone.gov)

Rape, Abuse, & Incest National Network

<https://rainn.org>

Tell My Daughters

<http://www.tellmydaughters.com>



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### Citations

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