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Caryn D. Riswold

Mary J. Streufert

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CARYN D. RISWOLD and MARY J. STREUFERT

# Views on Flourishing After the Age of Roe

During her opening remarks at the Radcliffe Institute's January 2023 conference on "The Age of Roe: The Past, Present, and Future of Abortion in America," Jane Kamensky, director of the Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America at Harvard, articulated a hope for everyone attending to come away with new knowledge and fresh framing. That accurately captured why we were there, a professor of religion at a Lutheran college and the director for gender justice and women's empowerment for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. We heard from over two dozen speakers in a dizzying array of professions and disciplines who covered a wide ideological spectrum: historians, political scientists, lawyers, nurses, medical doctors, global health activists, scholars of religion, ethicists, community organizers, and sociologists. There were Christians, Jews, Muslims, atheists, women and nonbinary people, men, and queer people, people who rejoiced when *Roe v. Wade* was overturned last summer, and people who likened it to a re-enslavement of women and pregnant people.

New knowledge about an issue that is among the most fraught and conflicted in American public life. Fresh framing for an experience that is among the most personal and intimate in a person's life.

How will we collectively navigate a social, political, and religious landscape where access to reproductive health

care is more limited now than it has been in fifty years? When the Supreme Court issued its decision in the case of *Dobbs v. Jackson*, it effectively eliminated access to safe and legal abortion care services in about half of the States that are anything but United on this issue.

Now what?

And, what do our respective roles in the Lutheran church and in Lutheran higher education have to do with whatever it is that comes next?

**Caryn:**

What I heard from the range of speakers throughout the two-day conference affirmed the need to equip more people for complex thought and community engagement. This is one way to encapsulate a goal of Lutheran higher education, which *Rooted and Open* declares as producing graduates who are "called and empowered to serve the neighbor so that all may flourish." Reading that statement



**Caryn D. Riswold, PhD**, is Professor of Religion and serves as the Mike and Marge McCoy Family Distinguished Chair in Lutheran Heritage and Mission at Wartburg College in Waverly, Iowa. [caryn.riswold@wartburg.edu](mailto:caryn.riswold@wartburg.edu)

**Mary J. Streufert, PhD**, serves as the Director for Gender Justice and Women's Empowerment for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and is the author of *Language for God: A Lutheran Perspective* (Fortress, 2022). [mary.streufert@elca.org](mailto:mary.streufert@elca.org)

through the frame of reproductive justice in a post-Dobbs world calls my attention to the nature of “flourishing.”

“The conference affirmed the need to equip more people for complex thought and community engagement.”

SisterSong defines reproductive justice as “the human right to maintain personal bodily autonomy, have children, not have children, and parent the children we have in safe and sustainable communities.” Importantly, it addresses “intersecting oppressions. Audre Lorde said, ‘There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives.’”<sup>1</sup> In her panel remarks at the Radcliffe conference, Getty Israel, CEO of Sisters in Birth, described it as multifaceted, intersectional, and comprehensive. It requires attention to economic justice, racism, sexism, environmental justice, mass incarceration, violence, equity in health care, and many more things.

Additionally, University of California-Berkeley law professor Khiara Bridges reminded us that it has long been the case that black people obtain a disproportionate number of abortions in the United States. Rather than inaccurately frame it as some nefarious predatory plan, she noted that this results from a complex set of factors including disproportionate rates of poverty, unequal access to contraception, higher rates of intimate partner violence, and reproductive coercion.<sup>2</sup> With many states now rendering healthcare more inaccessible, we will continue to see infant and maternal mortality and morbidity rates worsen.

Placing this in the context of our current carceral state, where, despite the fact that white people engage in criminalized behavior at the same rates, black and brown people are five times more likely to end up in the criminal justice system,<sup>3</sup> Bridges noted an additional risk. The need for abortion care services will not vanish. The *Dobbs* decision and many states’ individual decisions to criminalize abortion make it more likely that women and pregnant people will engage in behavior that has been criminalized, and again, more likely to be swept into the incarceration system.

None of this is what I would call “flourishing.”

For me, hope looks like people who are empowered to think in more complicated ways. Where there isn’t one right and one wrong answer. Where multiple types of knowledge are needed to solve complex problems. Where individuals are empowered to discern while embedded in communities. Where women are trusted.

Much of this is reflected in educational and missional goals found in Lutheran colleges and universities. Liberal arts education insists on skills and knowledge that broaden a person’s sense of the world and of themselves. Depth of education found in a variety of majors offered at NECU institutions strengthens preparation for professions like medicine, law, education, ministry, and a host of other things. Dedicated community engagement experiences bring students and campuses into relationship with and knowledge about their neighbor’s actual needs so that they might continue to grow as leaders in the communities that they will call home. Studying and living in communities where religion matters, where the Lutheran tradition is one of the roots that grounds this very work, is a powerful resource in this new era.

“For me, hope looks like people who are empowered to think in more complicated ways.”

The call is here. Our job is to empower.

Now, what resources does this particular Lutheran church have when it comes to thinking about this particular issue of Abortion?

### Mary:

As Caryn shares, multiple speakers called for the critical need to understand the total picture of reproductive justice when advocating and legislating specifically on abortion. As Khiara Bridges said, as a society, we must “respond to the structures within which people exist.” Only one of the three people who spoke overtly as Christian offered a complex perspective because of their faith. MT Dávila, an ethicist at Merrimack College, appealed to other Christians to privilege suffering. A theology of the cross, she said, compels us as Christians to discern Christian moral language and ethics

through a deep understanding of patriarchy and racism and the effects of these sins in national history.

“Within national history, the social statement on *Abortion* offers a third way to approach reproductive justice and abortion specifically.”

This might seem like a task too big to begin now in Lutheran thinking and action. From my perspective, the hard work among Lutherans began just as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America was forming. The 1991 ELCA Churchwide Assembly voted in favor of social teaching and policy on abortion in the form of a [social statement](#). In the current historical moment, no matter our views on abortion, I think this church can rely on the ELCA social statement on Abortion to remember, renew, and advance a complex religious approach to reproductive justice so that all may flourish.

Within national history, the social statement on *Abortion* offers a third way to approach reproductive justice and abortion specifically. “A developing life in the womb does not have an absolute right to be born, nor does a pregnant woman have an absolute right to terminate a pregnancy” (2). It not only lays out the kind of total social and personal picture Khiara Bridges, Getty Israel, and others advocated at the conference, it claims no labeled position for this church—neither “pro-choice” nor “pro-life.”

Instead, it calls for, among other things, healthcare, childcare, birth control, and equitable pay (8). And it explains this church’s position on access to abortion: it should not be easily accessible after a certain point in pregnancies and should not be treated like birth control, yet it should be safe, legal, and accessible (4; 9-10).

In addition, this ELCA social statement aligns with much of what we heard from legal scholars and women’s health advocates at this conference—that women and girls should be the ones to make decisions about pregnancies in the context of their own lives and relationships. (See 5-6.)

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America takes the analysis further through the social statement [Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action](#). It teaches that it is a Christian calling to foster social and religious beliefs, structures, and

habits to provide what people need to flourish and that do not discriminate or control people based on sex and gender.

At the heart of the questions of fostering justice and being critical thinkers, as Caryn points out, are real people. ELCA social teaching and policy gives moral guidance to a church body whose theology says governments are intended to serve people for flourishing. Just like our faith formation instructs individual persons to serve neighbors, so does a Lutheran understanding of justice compel us to serve neighbors through advocacy. What should happen in church and society to serve, as Getty Israel, who founded a health clinic in Mississippi to improve birth outcomes said, the big picture of reproductive justice *for all*?

## Conclusion

Not only do institutions that are part of this Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities have their own common calling upon which to lean, we have church teaching and policy and a theological rootedness that empowers us to engage in advocacy work, support members of our communities, and model complex thinking for the learners who live among us. So when it comes to new knowledge and fresh framing, we are already grounded in the gifts of this tradition, freed and empowered to serve our neighbors.

So that all may truly flourish.

## Endnotes

1. SisterSong Inc., “About Reproductive Justice.” Online: <https://www.sistersong.net/reproductive-justice>. Accessed 2/2/23.

2. See Guttmacher Institute, “Abortion Rates by Race and Ethnicity” (2017). Online: <https://www.guttmacher.org/infographic/2017/abortion-rates-race-and-ethnicity>; See also the report from the Pew Research Center, “What the data says about abortion in the U.S.,” by Jeff Diamant and Besheer Mohamed. Online: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2023/01/11/what-the-data-says-about-abortion-in-the-u-s-2/>

3. Ashley Nellis, “The Color of Justice: Racial and Ethnic Disparity in State Prisons,” *The Sentencing Project*. Online: <https://www.sentencingproject.org/reports/the-color-of-justice-racial-and-ethnic-disparity-in-state-prisons-the-sentencing-project/>. Accessed 2/2/23.