

# Questions and Answers on Inclusive Language

At St. Andrew's we are proud of our continuing efforts to be more inclusive. It was back in 1999, after much exploration and discussion, that the Session of St. Andrew's decided to use inclusive language in all events and services that take place here. Additionally, it was decided to discontinue the use of "feudal" language when referring to God, Jesus or humanity in general. Here are some answers to common questions about this language decision.

## **What do you mean by "inclusive language"?**

Inclusive language, when used to refer to God, is non-gendered. Therefore, God is not referred to as "He" or "Father", nor as "She" or "Mother" or any other title or adjective that would denote gender.

When talking about people, we say things like "humanity" instead of "mankind", and when non-specific references are made, we use gender-neutral pronouns. For example, we would not say, "First Church is looking for a new minister; I hope he is a good fit." Rather, we might say something like, "First Church is looking for a new minister; I hope they find one that is a good fit." Given that we strive for equality in roles and jobs, we will not assume that a particular unknown person is a specific gender simply because of their position.

## **What is meant by "feudal" language"?**

Some of our language comes from European roots in the Middle Ages, when "kings" and "lords" were common, and power was almost exclusively in the hands of men. When referring to God, we do not use the words "King" and "Lord", because that would make God male. When referring to Jesus, we do not use "king" and "lord", because it hints at a hierarchy that we believe Jesus repudiated. Our English word "Lord" is not in the original scriptures because they were not written in English. "Lord" is a translation of the Hebrew word "Adonai" and the Greek word "Kurios." Both root words are more flexible than our English word, that is, they could change to adapt to gender.

What is a "Lord?" To discover the masculine nature of the English word, one need only turn to the dictionary. Whereas the root of the word "lord" deals with bread, it developed to speak of the male who controls the bread. According to the American Heritage dictionary, "lord" is "the general masculine title of nobility." In the Oxford Dictionary, a lord is "a male peer of the realm, or a man with the title of Lord." In Riverside's Webster Dictionary a "lord" is "a man in dominion and power over others."

## **Why is this an important issue? Why pay so much attention to making language inclusive?**

We believe God is beyond gender. The constitution of the Presbyterian Church makes this clear when it says, "When people respond to God and communicate to each other their experiences of God, they must use symbolic means, for God transcends creation and cannot be reduced to anything within it." (Book of Worship, W-1.2002) Later, the Book of Worship states: "The church is committed to using language in such a way that all members of the community of faith may recognize themselves to be included, addressed, and equally cherished before God." (W-1.2006b) This last selection makes the point: using a male reference to God makes males look more like God than females.

## **I understand that some people have been abused by their fathers, but for other people "father" is a positive image. Must we discard it?**

Abuse is sometimes mentioned to get people thinking about how their language might affect others, but the problem we are addressing is much more wide spread than parental abuse alone. A little girl who constantly hears male imagery for God may conclude that her brother looks more like God than she does. With our theological speech we are trying to envision a new world where all God's children can come to fullness. This will be more difficult if the language we use in worship pictures God as looking like some of us, but not like others.

Our view of life has an effect on the kind of world we produce in our lives. As researchers have tried to discover why some cultures produce rape and battering they have found a few constants. Cultures that link masculinity with control over women will produce more rape. If we wanted to design a rape culture, sexist theology would be a good blueprint. To say that our divine source is male is perhaps the most sexist comment a person can make. To equate the Almighty with masculinity might or might not hurt a particular victim of abuse, but it will definitely teach a view of life where our little girls will be more likely to be abused in the future.

## **Is St. Andrew's attempting to be the "thought police"?**

Our decision to use inclusive language applies to all our services and events. We are not attempting to control personal religious practice. We would, however, like everyone to be aware of their language habits and always be on the lookout for bias, prejudice and privilege. A constant vigilance is needed to avoid falling into one of our most pervasive cultural traps: sexism.

How you address God personally is not at issue here. If thinking of God as male is meaningful to you, then you are welcome to do so. As a member you are free to speak of God in your own way in classes and discussions. It is in our common language of worship and in teaching that we are asking for greater care. While there is a place for airing any opinion or idea at our church, the worship service is not that arena. We insist that worship be a safe place for all people. This requires that we not use language that excludes people for reasons of age, ability, race, gender or any other human condition. Members can speak of God without this burden, but we hold our leaders to a higher standard.

### **I am a woman raised in the church and this language did not and does not bother me.**

It is hard to know when one has become numb. Many churches do not allow women to be leaders. While our denomination does not discriminate to that extent, one can look at how female clergy are treated and realize that the paradigm for leadership is male even in our denomination. Women can certainly rise above the church's prejudice, but why not insist on being treated fairly instead? Even if you have processed and retranslated the church's bias against you, you can help us do a better job with our children.

### **I worry that we will lose the personal aspects of worship. "Parent" isn't as personal as "Father." These changes don't leave me anything personal to hold on to.**

This is an important argument. The gendered pronouns were easy ways to convey the personal aspect of God's love. Luther argued this case when he said that the heart of the New Testament is in its pronouns. At the same time we must never forget that while God is personal, God is not a human person.

The Bible sternly warns against our efforts to reduce God to comfortable and reassuring human terms. John's Gospel reminds us that it is not our love for God, but God's love for us that is important. Mature spirituality does not try to be a personal friend to God. Mature faith expresses God's love in real human relationships. What can we hold on to personally? We can hold onto one another. Children do need more concrete imagery to begin their journey. We give them a handle through all the wonderful stories of the Bible, particularly in the life of Jesus who made the love of God very personal.

### **What if some people are made uncomfortable by inclusive language?**

We should always be pastoral to people who are hurting. These changes can feel like a death and some people will need time to grieve the changes. But we must not minister to one group by using language that excludes another group.

### **Shouldn't we respect Church tradition?**

The great formulas of the church give us a common vocabulary of meaning so we can share faith with people all over the world. Unfortunately, a time honored tradition of the church is sexism. Luther said if women die in childbirth it is no big loss since that's what they were made for. Tertullian said that women are "the gateway to the devil." The founder of the Presbyterian Church said that to allow women roles of leadership would be an abomination before God.

We believe that the discrimination of women should cease. Church unity is not created simply by everyone saying the same creeds. True unity requires the recognition of the worth of each of us. An appeal to tradition could be an argument against any reformation, ever, including Luther's and Jesus'.

### **Isn't this out of step with the vast majority of churches?**

Because most churches use sexist terms, we do lose some ability to communicate with them when we remove gendered and feudal language. This is a genuine cost of choosing justice over tradition. Consider the alternative. Does true unity come from reducing ourselves to the lowest common denominator? Should we mistreat gay and lesbian Christians because most of the church does? Would this be true unity? Would it be helpful to strip women of leadership roles altogether since much of the church does not consider them worthy of such responsibility? When the church speaks a language that divides the world, it should be no surprise that it is difficult to bring peace to that broken world. It would be better to speak a language that does not divide us in the first place.

### **One More Thought:**

In theology we are not really describing God, because God is beyond human words and comprehension. In theology, we are building a bridge to the sacred through our human images. In theology we are envisioning an ideal world where God's will for each of us is fulfilled, so it is important not to limit God to a gender. In theology we are putting a face on the sacred. It is important not to say that some faces look more like God than others. Inclusive language for God and people is an important and tangible way to make us all aware of our sacredness. We encourage a constant conversation that increases our understanding of sexism and privilege and how universal love and justice can be lived out in our daily lives.