

Policy
on
Inclusive Language

Uniting Church Theological Hall

Synod of Victoria

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This Faculty affirms as a policy the use of inclusive language in activities within its province. To facilitate this, it commends the attached guidelines on inclusive language to its teachers and students as a guide for language use in academic and community activities.

There are several major reasons for this action:

1. a concern for justice for all those who are or who feel excluded and victimised by language which is inaccurately exclusive or prejudicial;
2. a concern for the development and expression of pastoral care and relationship with those among whom we minister and will minister; and
3. a concern for the development within staff and students of accurate use of language for the task of communication of the gospel in our present society.

It is recommended that staff and students consider the development of accuracy of language as one of the aims of their teaching and learning in theological education, as an important element in preparation for and practice of ministry, and as a factor in the assessment of competent grasp of subject matter within their courses.

(Adopted 11th October, 1989)

Introduction

Language is important. It not only reflects our experience of reality, it also shapes it and defines the relationships we have with each other. Development of accurate and fair uses of language is an important part of theological education and of preparation as ministers of the gospel.

Language is constantly changing. The meanings of words are constantly changing and the ways in which words are appropriately used are also constantly changing.

Language is relative. It is analagous, symbolical and metaphorical, rarely purely univocal, literal and direct. When, because of changing contexts, particular words cease to convey a reality fully or convey a false impression, they may and should be changed or redefined.

Language is power. It establishes status and defines relationship. When we are committed to full humanity for all women and men, girls and boys, we need to ensure that such fulness is expressed in our practical use of language as well as in our stated intentions.

Language is a current issue. Whether we like it or not, large segments of the population among whom we will minister are sensitive to accurate and inclusive uses of language and are offended by misuses. These insights and sensitivities must be taken into account in effective communication of the gospel in our present society.

Making deliberate changes in one's established use of language is not always easy and can at times seem

awkward and inconvenient. Such awkwardness and inconvenience, however, is characteristic of creative periods and is not adequate reason for avoidance of the issue or perpetuation of inaccuracy or injustice. Indeed, in a time of transition such awkwardness may serve as a useful reminder to others of the importance of the issue.

The following guidelines are not intended to be comprehensive in covering every possible situation. Staff and students are encouraged to explore the variety of alternative ways in which language may be made more inclusive and accurate.

Major forms of sexism in language

The Australian Government *Style Manual* (1988) identifies four major aspects of sexism in the English language. These aspects may also be applied to other groups who are frequently affected by exclusive language, such as particular racial groups, class groups, or age groups.

Invisibility

Women are often invisible in language. The word "man" (on its own as well as in compounds) and the masculine pronouns "he", "him", and "his" are used generically — that is, they are used to refer to both men and women. Though used generically, the term generally serves to reinforce a secondary place given to women. In some cases, women are actually excluded by the generic term, as in

As for man, he is no different from the other animals: his back aches, he ruptures easily, his women have difficulties in childbirth.

Dependence

Women are often portrayed in language as being the deviation from the norm or having a subordinate status to men. The expressions "lady doctor" or "woman minister" suggest that women are an oddity in certain situations and thus require special linguistic treatment. Similarly with the use of the "feminine" suffixes -ess, -ette and -trix added to the "masculine" form of a word, as in author/authoress or poet/poetess. This seeming dependence of women on men is also illustrated by social titles and terms of address for women which describe women in relation to men, as in "John Brown and his wife Jane" or "Mrs John Brown".

Trivialisation

Women and women's actions, activities and occupations are often trivialised or denigrated, as in such expressions, "he drives like an old woman" or "just a housewife" or "the girls in the office."

Stereotyping

Women are often portrayed in a stereotyped manner, as in terms of roles such as "wife of" or "homemaker". While the physical attributes of men are seldom mentioned, those of women are frequently described in detail and in contexts where they are irrelevant. Character stereotyping of women and men is also inaccurate and impoverishing, such as praising acquiescence and emotion in women and leadership and control of emotion in men.

Inclusive language in assignments and general conversation

Quotations from published texts

If there is a need to quote from a published text that is written in sexist language, one of the following approaches may be used:

- (a) The words in question can be paraphrased or not quoted directly, in such a way that the sexist expression is avoided.
- (b) The word "sic" (= as in the original), enclosed in square brackets, can be inserted immediately after the sexist expression.
- (c) The quotation can be left intact, since it should be clear that it is not the work of the author using it.

Use of "man" in the generic sense

The two meanings of "man" and its derivatives — to refer to a male human being or to male and female human beings — can cause confusion and create the impression that women are invisible, absent or less important than men. In the interest of clarity of expression as well as of equal representation of the sexes, the word "man" in the generic sense should be replaced by one of the following:

humans people women and men person

humanity humankind individual everybody

For example:

A man shows his faith in God by. One shows one's faith in God ...

The love of God is for all men The love of God is for everybody

Lord of all mankind Lord of all people/humankind

Sometimes it may be possible to rephrase the sentence in such a way that the word "man" is avoided, as in

All men are brothers We are all brothers and sisters

Use of "man" in compounds

The word "man" also occurs in compounds as a prefix (eg. manpower) or as a suffix (eg. layman). These can generally be avoided by use of alternative words and phrases, eg.

manhood (generic) adulthood

layman layperson

spokesman representative, official

It may be possible and preferable to avoid such a word by rephrasing the sentence in which it occurs, as in

Who's the spokesman? Who's speaking on behalf of the group?

In cases where occupations are designated by the suffix -man, alternatives should be found, eg.

clergyman minister, clergyperson.

chairman the chair, chairperson, presiding officer,

convenor, person chairing the meeting.

If a gender inclusive title is used, it should be used both for men and women. One should avoid using the inclusive term when a woman holds the position and a male term when a man holds the position, as in

Frank is chairman of the men's group and Edith is chairperson of the women's group.

A number of nouns designating nationalities contain the suffix -man, such as Englishman, can simply be replaced by "The English". A singular form may sometimes be replaced by a plural.

"Man" as a verb

Wherever possible, it is preferable to avoid using "man" as a verb. An alternative term should be found, as in

Will you man the phones? Will you look after the phones?

Use of "man" in idioms and phrases

The use of the noun "man" in its generic sense should be avoided in idioms and phrases. Alternatives should be found, as in

the man in the pew ordinary people, the average church-goer

man to man person to person

Use of "father" and related terms to refer to men and women

Exclusive terms that refer to men and women should be rephrased to reflect that reality, such as

faith of our fathers faith of our ancestors/forebears/parents

brotherhood of man bond of humanity

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Use of "master"

The word "master" has for many an implicit or explicit association with maleness because one of its meanings is "male head of household." Alternatives (competence, expertise, proficiency) should be found, such as

I'm trying to master Greek I'm trying to become competent in Greek

Use of "he", "him", "his" as generic pronouns

Though "he", "him", "his" are still the only correct generic pronouns, like the term "man", their two meanings — referring to a male human being or to male and female human beings — can cause confusion and create the impression that women are invisible, absent or less important than men. In the interest of clarity of expression as well as of equal representation of the sexes, alternatives should be found. A number of alternatives are possible.

(a) Using he/she...him/her...his/her, as in

The biblical student should read his/her bible regularly.

(b) Recasting the sentence in the plural, as in

Biblical students should read their bibles regularly.

(c) Repeating the generic (gender-inclusive) noun, as in

God reveals God's nature to all people.

(d) Rephrase the sentence so that the subject is inanimate, as in

God's nature is made known to all people.

(e) Eliminating the pronoun altogether, as in

Biblical students should read the bible regularly.

(f) Recasting the sentence so that "you" is the pronoun, as in

As a biblical student, you should read your bible regularly

(g) Using "one" and "one's", as in

As a biblical student, one should read one's bible regularly.

(h) In some cases the generic use of "he" may be avoided by use of the passive voice or a relative clause, as in

When a student exegetes a passage, he must follow several steps.

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Use of the pronoun "she" to refer to inanimate nouns such as countries, cyclones, ships, cars and the church should be avoided. The pronoun "it" is more appropriate in such situations, as in

The church in her wisdom The church in its wisdom

Titles, salutations, and other modes of address

Men and women being addressed should receive equal treatment. If a man is addressed by his first name or by title, a woman should be similarly addressed, as in:

Dr. Brown and Mary Brown Dr. Brown and Ms Brown

"Ms", "Miss", "Mrs"

Use of the title "Mr" before a man's name merely identifies that person as a man. The titles "Miss" and "Mrs" not only identify the person as a woman but also identify her marital status as single or married. The title "Ms" was introduced in order to avoid such differentiation. Use and acceptance of the title is not universal.

If a woman's title preference is known, it should be used, thus respecting her choice.

Alternatively a title can be left out altogether. "Ms" should be used for a woman whose title preference is unknown.

Modes of address in correspondence.

In the past it was general practice to use the salutation "Dear Sir" or "Dear Sirs" as a form of general address in letters. In order to extend equal treatment to both sexes, a number of alternative forms can be used:

Dear Sir/Madam, Dear Madam or Sir

Dear Manager, Dear Director, Dear Colleague, Dear Friend

When addressing a person whose name is known but whose sex is not known, the following are acceptable:

Dear R. Brown or Dear Mr or Ms Brown

When addressing a person whose title is unknown, one of the following may be used:

Dear Mary Brown /Ms Brown or Dear Roger Brown /Mr Brown

When replying to correspondence signed jointly by a man and a woman, both persons should be acknowledged in the salutation in the order and form in which their names appear in the correspondence.

Think plural

When addressing or writing to a situation, assume that readers and listeners will be of both sexes, so that

both are included, as in

Ministers and wives Ministers and spouses

Women serving the tea. Women and men serving the tea.

Describing women and men

Portrayal of the sexes in general should be balanced. One should recognise and avoid language that denigrates or trivialises women and women's activities or that portrays women as dependent on men, such as

Ministers have wives and children to support. (Are ministers all male?)

Have you visited Mr. Brown's widow? (It avoids her name and identifies her only by her relationship to a dead person!)

She did well for a woman minister. (What was expected?)

Care should be exercised to ensure that a characteristic that is seen as desirable in a man is not given a different interpretation in a woman, as in calling a man *independent* or *determined* but a woman *aloof* or *stubborn*.

Representation of women in illustrations

Care should be taken to ensure that both women and men are represented in a variety of roles.

Inclusive language and use of the bible

It is not appropriate nor acceptable to change arbitrarily a historical text through emendation or translation because of one's disagreement or difference of opinion with its content or form. Where language is intentionally sexist in the original it ought not be "softened" or altered.

In many cases, however, exclusive word to word correspondence in translation is often less accurate than a more inclusive word-in-context translation. It is acceptable, therefore, to change something like "brethren" to "brothers and sisters" when Paul is giving a message to the whole people of God.

There has been increased awareness among bible translators in recent years of how the biases of one's culture may be projected onto the work of translation and interpretation. More recent translations, such as the New Jerusalem Bible and the New Revised Standard Version, have consciously aimed to eliminate extraneous generic male language.

For example, in Greek the writers make a careful distinction between *anthropos*, which means human, person, or people and *aner* which means adult male and/or husband. Though N.T. writers almost always use *anthropos*

when speaking about people in general, most translations invariably render it as "man" and "men". Thus Titus 2:11 in the RSV reads "the grace of God has appeared for the salvation of all men" (not a lot of comfort for women!), though the verse uses the form of *anthropos* and should read "people".

In Hebrew the most common word used in this sense is *adam*, which is used generally in the generic sense of human being or humanity. Proverbs 3:13 in the RSV reads "Happy is the man who finds wisdom, and the man who gets understanding," when the text both times uses *adam* and should be translated "Happy is the person who finds wisdom, and the person who gets understanding".

Likewise, care should be exercised in translating and interpreting passages relating to male-female relationships, role authority, and marriage obligations, all of which are areas in which women have been significantly culturally disadvantaged and victimised. In addition to obvious cultural differences between biblical society and present society, some translations of key passages reflect cultural bias projected onto the translation, serving to reinforce a particular doctrinal view or to obscure the place and contribution of women expressed within the original text.

Such occurs in Ephesians 5 with unjustified projections of assumed authority into Paul's use of the term *kephale*, the head. Likewise in Romans 16:1, Phoebe is described as a *diakonos*. When applied to men, the term is most often translated as "minister" or transliterated as "deacon" and assumed to denote an office of church administration. In Phoebe's case however, such credit is not given. The KJV, NAS, and NIV all call her "a servant of the church"; the NEB suggests she "holds office"; the RSV calls her a "deaconess" (a term not used till the 16th century); and the Living Bible patronizingly calls her "a dear Christian woman".

In using bible translations, therefore, staff and students should compare translations and use the one which best expresses the meaning of the original text, especially in those instances where the Hebrew or Greek is more inclusive than English generic usage has generally conveyed. Alternatively they may provide a translation which gives appropriate expression to the original text.

Where sexist language exists in the text, it is appropriate to give due explanation to worshippers which sets the scripture in its historical context.

Where the scripture is not being read directly, but is being used liturgically or within a sermon, a paraphrase which remains true to the broader witness of scripture may be used.

When dealing with biblical texts which completely ignore women, the preacher or worship leader may acknowledge the omission and incorporate the missing dimensions in the introduction or within the sermon.

References to God

The language of theology and worship is the means used by the believing community to express its understanding and experience of God and of the Christian faith. As such it is a powerful force in shaping and maintaining that community. It is important also to remember that theological language is a human response to divine revelation. It is therefore fallible, limited in time and space, and subject to change as new information, new insights and new contexts arise.

Language of course can never fully comprehend or adequately express the majesty and mystery of the living God, but in choosing the language we use to express this majesty and mystery, it is important that the social connotation of the words used does not distort the truth or impede the thrust of God's liberating truth.

Language about God is especially problematic. The bible was written in a patriarchal time and it is understandable that the language and imagery used to describe God is primarily masculine. Individual scholars and theologians disagree on the extent to which this characteristic should be corrected in our present time, and scope needs to be allowed for ongoing discussion to take place. The biblical name, YHWH, "I am who I am" suggests that God will be appropriate to the occasion; our language also should reflect that reality.

It needs to be recognised at the same time that both biblical and theological language in the past has frequently used masculine pronouns and forms for God even when the original language was not gender-specific or may even have been feminine. The results of this tradition of emphasising masculine imagery of God and ignoring the feminine has been to limit the possibilities for women to understand fully their place in God's creation and redemption, to perpetuate sexist attitudes in our society, to limit a full appreciation of God's nature, and to restrict a full expression of our diverse individual human natures (see for eg. images of Wisdom as a woman in Prov. 1:20-33, 3:13-20, 8:, 9:1-6; 'Mother' images of God in Num. 11:12, Deut. 32:11,18, Job 38:29, Ps. 22:9-10, 27:10, 36:7, 131:1-3, Is. 31:5, 42:14, 46:3-4, 49:15, 66:13, Jer. 31:15-22) .

In developing a richer and more accurate language in relation to God the following should be noted.

1. The difficulties of exclusively masculine language are not to be solved by making God impersonal, nor by substituting exclusively female language. As is noted above, problems with exclusive male pronouns can frequently be avoided by the substitution of alternative words or the reordering of particular phrases or sentence structures, as in

This is our God. We acknowledge This is our God, whom we

Him to be our Master. He is our acknowledge as our Leader and

Friend. Friend

There are many words and images for God that embody the reality of our personal relationship with God in a non-exclusive way, such as

Father, King, He, Him, God, Father/Mother, Creator, Master Spirit

Friend, Sustainer, Redeemer,

Nurturer, Source of Life, You,

Your, Maker, Ruler, Sustainer,

Wisdom Sovereign, Eternal One,

Liberator.

Inclusiveness will not necessarily be achieved in one sentence. Avoiding a cherished and traditional term such as "Father," which was also used by Jesus, may not be necessary if it is used in a context where it is seen as one ascription among many others which are also richly evocative of the feminine. Combining the use of Father with Mother, or alternating them sensibly on occasion not only gives clearer expression to the biblical truth, but serves to awaken people to valuable truths that may have been suppressed in the past, as in

God, who is as a Father and a Mother to us.

2. Jesus was a male and we necessarily use some male nouns and pronouns when referring to him. It should be noted though that the gospel writers frequently referred to Jesus not as *aner* = an adult male, but as *anthropos* = a person. So I Tim 2:5 in the RSV reads, "...there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" rather than "...there is one mediator between God and people (*anthropon*), the person (*anthropos*) Christ Jesus" (see also for eg. Mt. 11:19, Lk 23:14, Jn 7:46, 9:16, 24). Use of exclusive masculine terms can legitimately be reduced. The term Christ and the redemptive role of Christ are not related to Jesus' maleness. In many cases, therefore, it is more accurate to use terms and pronouns which emphasise not maleness but humanity.

3. In language about the Holy Spirit, feminine and neuter references are both appropriate and biblically rooted. In Hebrew the word for Holy Spirit (*ruach*) is usually feminine; the Greek word (*pneuma*) is neuter. Though grammatical gender does not equate with sex differentiation, referring to the Holy Spirit as "she" may be a useful way of metaphorically including all human relationships in the Trinity and may counter the unwarranted masculine assumptions about the Trinity which conventional usage has created.

4. Given the many other associated doctrinal and ecumenical issues surrounding the Trinitarian

formulation, the traditional formula "God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit" should be used when the community is expressing the Trinitarian faith which places it within the one holy, catholic and apostolic church.

Inclusive language in worship

Preaching

Inclusive language should be considered in the preparation of a sermon text (see guidelines above). In addition to the actual language used, positive steps can be taken to increase inclusiveness by including illustrations drawn from women's experience and women's lives, and by including in one's references works by women writers, women theologians, etc.

Avoid the use of illustrations or humour which ridicule or put down women, or reinforce subordination and inferiority of women. As one should avoid the use of exclusive gender terms in reference to God, so one should avoid exclusive gender terms in relation to evil or the devil.

Hymns

Leaders of worship should peruse hymns beforehand to ensure that the language is inclusive of both male and female, and that their imagery is theologically sound and doxologically helpful.

Where a printed order of service is used, hymns in the public domain can usually be altered and the revised version printed. If this is done extensively, worship leaders should consult a guide to the editing of hymns. (The church has always felt free to change the content of hymns as its understanding of the faith changed. John Wesley in particular freely changed texts before publication.)

Where hymn texts are still under copyright, several things may be done. Minor changes can be announced orally before singing (note that too many announced changes may confuse a congregation). These changes may include avoidance of particular words, or alternating of words from one gender reference to the other where appropriate. Such announcements serve also to make the congregation more aware of the importance of inclusiveness of their worship and service. Particularly offensive stanzas may be omitted when the hymn is sung. Where it is impossible to change the language, the fact that the language of the hymn is not inclusive may be noted in announcing the hymn.

Before changing or reprinting a hymn still under copyright, necessary permission must be gained from the copyright holder. Worship leaders may also seek out alternative sources of hymns which are more inclusive in intent and content.

Prayers

The language of public prayers should also be inclusive (see guidelines above). Prayers provide an

excellent opportunity, not only to address God in the fulness of God's nature, but also to make the congregation aware of the richness of imagery by which God may be known, understood and worshipped.

In conclusion

Theological education should be a time for expansion of ideas and experiment with new structures of expression and meaning. The development, not only of meaningful theological content, but also of accurate language by which that content is expressed, should be accepted and affirmed as part of an important process of education and preparation for ministry.

Note

The material in this guide has been culled extensively from other guides and works. In many places large chunks of material have been used almost verbatim. No specific acknowledgement has been given for these passages within the text itself in order to provide as free-flowing and as readable a guide as possible. Readers interested in following the matter through in more detail should consult the texts themselves. Those interested in adapting parts of this guide should consult the original texts themselves and give due acknowledgement to the original works rather than to this particular guide. The texts which have been used most extensively are:

A Guide to Inclusive Church Language, Second edition. Prepared by The Task Force on Women, Presbytery of the Twin Cities Area. June 1979.

Faull, Vivienne and Sinclair, Jane, *Count Us In — Inclusive Language in Liturgy*, Nottingham: Grove Books, 1986.

Guidelines for Inclusive Language. As Approved by the General Council Executive of the United Church of Canada. November 1981.

Hardesty, Nancy, *Inclusive Language in the Church*. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1987.

Nolan, Elizabeth, "Ten Painless Ways to Improve Your Language," *Australian Ministry*, 1:2 (1989).

Style Manual for Authors, Editors and Printers, Fourth Edition. Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1988.