

**Toward A More Inclusive Language  
For  
Vanderbilt Divinity School  
And the  
Graduate Department of Religion**

In 1979 a committee of the faculty and students of Vanderbilt Divinity School and the Graduate Department of Religion, called by the dean and supported by a resolution of the faculty at large, drafted a document on inclusive language that was revised in 1987. The argument for inclusive language rested on several convictions:

- a. Language shapes and reflects the world we experience
- b. Language should affirm diversity among groups of people
- c. Language should respect and never demean the full personhood of each individual
- d. Responsibility for the values conveyed through language and for the usage of appropriate language is not just an individual matter, but of concern for the entire VDS/GDR community, as this institution seeks to be just and faithful

The original document focused on sexism in language and served both as an introduction for those new to the issue and as a resource for those struggling to find alternatives for exclusive terms. Today sexism is not the only problem that must be addressed, and the need for an introduction and a step-by-step resource for alternative language is not as necessary as it was two decades ago. Today racist, heterosexist, homophobic, and other forms of language that denigrate persons and groups require comparable attention and reformation. Changing inadequate and destructive language is only the surface of broader ideological and structural transformations necessary to achieve genuine respect for diversity.

Nonetheless, the approach for correcting sexist language summarized briefly below may offer an elementary model for the kind of careful attention required to change negative, hostile, demeaning, exclusive language in other areas. The establishment of appropriate language must attend to at least the following four areas:

1. Human references

Ministers and teachers should pay attention to the bias behind pronouns, nouns, idioms, and axioms used unwittingly from the religious tradition to refer to the name, titles, and roles people occupy in life. Gendered nouns, (e.g., mankind, brotherhood) can be replaced easily by inclusive nouns, (e.g., humankind, community, household).

2. God references

Masculine titles, pronouns, and imagery for God have served as a cornerstone for patriarchy. However, religious tradition in scripture and history offers a richness of expression. In addition, a few biblical references for God imply no gender at all (e.g., friend, creator, redeemer, sustainer). Exploration of fresh language for God requires a

serious effort to comprehend our personal experiences and understandings of God and a respect for the diversity of the practices of different worshiping communities.

### 3. Bible translation

New Bible translations such as the Inclusive Language Lectionary or the New Revised Standard Version have attempted to address the problems of exclusive language in a variety of ways with varying degrees of success. Beyond the work of revision committees, all persons who read scripture share the responsibility of translation. Some masculine expressions do not appear in the original Hebrew or Greek texts and cannot be replaced without misconstruing the text. Other references reflect historical situations of an ancient patriarchal society and present greater difficulty in appropriate translation. Translations that respect human diversity and divine mystery rest on several assumptions: (a) patriarchy should not be an essential part of religious faith; (b) translation is an ongoing process, and the authority of the text does not rest on the actual words of the text; (c) many regard some texts as revelatory and some texts as counter-revelatory; and (d) careful attention and due responsibility are necessary to avoid an oppressive and destructive use of particular texts.

### 4. Liturgy

On the one hand, using inclusive language in new liturgies seems relatively simple. Yet, on the other hand, creeds, confessions, the Lord's Prayer, sermons, and hymns often possess an almost sacred status. Fortunately, new hymns and new hymnals have appeared over the past two decades. Some ministers now attempt to use a wider diversity of examples and gender references in sermons and prayers. Change in the other areas of creeds and confessions has progressed more slowly.

Changing religious and liturgical language touches on deeper matters related to theological understandings of key religious doctrines, traditions, and practices. In the past two decades, extensive research and publication related to questions of inclusivity have occurred not only in the area of language and worship, but also in several areas of religious studies. In addition to reflection on gender and language, scholarship on race, sexuality, and class has expanded. While knowledge and awareness have increased, there is still more work to do. Efforts to challenge sexist language must be extended to the other arenas of racist and heterosexist language. Cultural backlash is a common response. Ongoing community attention to the use of language in the VDS/GDR remains a critical shared concern.