

Inclusive Language – An Inclusive Church

Why Inclusive Language *by Rev. Dr. Brent Hawkes*



Introduction

I don't know about some of you, but I sure do miss some of the old hymns like "Rise Up O Men of God," "Dear Lord and Father of Mankind," "Faith of our Fathers," and many others.

They were hymns I sang growing up and they are part of the spirituality of my childhood. The problem is that I just can't sing those songs anymore. They are no more appropriate for me today than are the racist chants of the Klu Klux Klan or the homophobic rhetoric of the Moral Majority.

They are unacceptable because exclusive language is sinful. Sexism is as evil as the bigotry of racism, classism, or ageism.

They are unacceptable because those songs exclude at least half of the population of the world. Women will never be "men of God," and they should not be made to feel inferior because they are not.

Sexist language in songs or prayers, or any part of worship, is unacceptable because it says something about God which is not true and which is unbiblical. God is not "man"; that is obvious, but neither is God exclusively male. The Bible is filled with feminine images of God which have been almost entirely ignored. To speak of

our experience of God as male is to miss the God of the Hebrews and of Jesus.

Exclusive language is also unacceptable because it says something about us as persons which is not true.

Sexism cuts us off from our feminine side as if it were weak or inferior. This is a block to emotional and spiritual integration and wholeness. Psychologist, Carl Jung, wrote quite extensively about the "bothness" of human beings. He contended that the more fully a person is aware of and had integrated both sides of their being, the more emotionally healthy they were. I might add that the more we are able to integrate both parts of ourselves, the closer we draw to the image and likeness of God in which we were created.

"...male and female – God created them."

You may recall that in Genesis we are told that when God comes to the creation of humans, the language becomes plural, "Let us make humans in our image...Male and female God created them." It is apparent from this that both masculinity and femininity were parts of the image and likeness of God. As we integrate both in ourselves, we draw closer to that image and likeness which was God's original intention.

Inclusive language is not an issue of gender. It is not a woman's issue. The issue is sin and the resulting brokenness. We must be alert so that our language does not perpetuate the sin of excluding people, misrepresenting God, and increasing our own internal estrangement.

An Inclusive Church

The richness of MCC is that we seek to be a truly inclusive church. We believe that "God so loved the world," and we try in every way to consistently reflect that belief.

Gender exclusiveness, like racist language, impoverishes us all. If the entire membership of Metropolitan Community Church of Toronto were male, we would still use inclusive language for the following reasons:

1. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is inclusive. That is truly the heart of the matter.
2. Our feminine side is as divine (God-like) as our masculine side.
3. God is historically, theologically, and experientially both masculine and feminine, and we will not be robbed of knowing the fullness of God.
4. Fencing people out or implying that they are inferior by our words is sinful and unchristian.
5. It is the policy of the UFMCC and we are a full and faithful part of that denomination.

A Positive Expansion

Our position on inclusive language is not a reaction to pressure or in any way a limitation. Rather, it is a positive expansion.

We are expanding the way we talk about God in hope that we may also expand our experience of God. We are also expanding our language about ourselves as an attempt to open ourselves more fully to the complete redemption God’s inclusive love offers.

By following these guidelines, we are better able as a church to draw people in, rather than fence people out:

1. We never use exclusively masculine or feminine terms referring to human beings. When we talk about people in general we do not say man, mankind, brothers, brotherhood, etc. Similarly, we ought not to presume a person’s gender because of stereotypes (e.g. farmers aren’t always “he” or nurses always “she”).
2. It is our goal to always attempt to present a balanced picture of God. Yes, God is our Father, but God is also our Mother who birthed creation and who nurses us still (Isaiah 42:14; 46:3-4; 49:15). For so many centuries, we have referred to God in exclusively masculine terms. We need to make extraordinary efforts not to reinforce that image which is so strong that it has warped our total experience of God. If we refer to God in masculine terms, we must then be equally willing to speak of God’s femininity. It may be more helpful to avoid as much as possible all anthropomorphic (human-like) references to God. God is neither a man nor a woman.

3. When we speak of Jesus, we ought to be aware that there is a difference between the human Jesus and the divine Christ. Again, just as every person is both masculine and feminine, so too, Jesus was historically biologically male, but the pre-existent, and resurrected One is beyond limited human labels such as gender.
4. In as much as possible, we seek to use inclusive language in our conversations, the songs we sing, our liturgy, and any publications. It is our goal to live out with integrity the truth that the Gospel is equally inclusive of all people.
5. We deeply regret if there are those who do not agree with our policy. We do not wish to exclude you if your views differ, **but anything and anyone who represents this church must adhere to this policy. We will not use sexist language and this is no more negotiable than our avoidance of racist language.** Our language should reflect out faith in positive ways so that all may believe God’s love includes them equally. About this we must have integrity.

“God is Leading Us Forward in Love...”

Beyond Gender

Inclusive language is not just gender inclusive, either. One favourite song of the youth group in which I grew up was “They Will Know We Are Christians by Our Love.” One day a member of the congregation asked if we might not change one verse of the song which says “We will walk with each other; we will walk hand in hand...” You see, this person was a quadriplegic and could not walk with us. We were glad to change the words because we meant the words “They will know we are Christians by our love.”

The Challenge of Change

Inclusivity is new for some of us and old patterns take time to change, but we’re trying and we thank you for your patience as we continue to grow in our understating of God and ourselves. Sometimes growth is awkward and even painful. God is leading our Fellowship onward and new ground is often a bit rough. God is leading us forward in love, and together we will make it to the Promised Land where ALL of us are equally included.

Above all else, let us remember the words of an old hymn we still sing every now and then, “Beyond the sacred page we seek thee, God.”

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