

Guidelines for Expansive and Inclusive Language
Adopted by the 80th General Convention of The Episcopal Church

Introduction

Language is a gift of God. God is one who speaks. God calls all creation into being and gives people language as a way of responding to God and forming community.¹

- In the context of God-given human freedom, languages develop as cultural products of humanity.
- Language, while a gift of God, is damaged, finite, and limited. Language has been used for good and for ill throughout the history of the church and the world.
- Development of liturgical language must enlist the skills of scholars, poets, linguists, musicians, and cultural specialists.

We seek to maximize rather than erase language from our liturgical lexicon.

- Language matters. It shapes our sense of reality, and through language we forge and maintain our relationships with God and one another.

Expansive Language: Expansive language seeks to tell as much truth about God as we can, utilizing the full range of language available to us. It does not displace traditional language for God, but uses additional metaphors. Of course, no human language can contain God. Even so, our theologies of creation, Incarnation, and Resurrection affirm that the material world, including language, is a means to understand God in a more faithful way.²

Inclusive Language: Our language often has built-in biases that exclude and harm some persons. When exclusive language is used, we fall short of our calling to respect all who are created in the image of God. By using inclusive language for humanity, we respect the dignity of every human being and we affirm our faith in “the communion of saints” as expressed in the Apostles’ Creed.³

Metaphorical Language: Words and images matter. They shape our perceptions; they can make the difference between forging trust or creating distance. Language changes and grows as the church grows in its understanding and embrace of diverse groups of people.

- The purpose of liturgy is to worship God.
- Worship in The Episcopal Church is not formulated in a vacuum.
- Ecumenical agreements and historical formulations, particularly for Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry, are important norms in the work of liturgical revision and creation.⁴

- Liturgical language about Jews should avoid supersessionism and avoid the assumption that the assembly comprises only Gentile Christians.
- The church worships in many languages. The principles outlined in this document are primarily for use in English. Dynamic translations of inclusive and expansive language will require their own application of these principles.

LANGUAGE ABOUT/FOR GOD

Expansive Language

The church continually draws from the vocabulary of the Scriptures, expanding the treasury of language and images in order to proclaim the fullness of the triune God.⁵

We aim to expand language for God (names, metaphors) that has not been included in our current liturgical language, maximizing/multiplying our liturgy's language for God.

This includes but is not limited to, drawing language/verbal pictures from Scripture and from the 2,000-year-old textual deposit of Christian liturgy and theology.

- As the church expands its liturgical language for God, it should attend to imagery that has resonated with different Christians communities, in different times, places, and cultural landscapes.
- The church recognizes that the Old Testament/Hebrew Scriptures constitutes a majority of our Scripture; i.e., we ought not always default to language drawn from the New Testament.
- We seek language for God that implicitly acknowledges that all of humanity is created in the image of God, being mindful in particular of the ways that gendered language for God can sometimes imply otherwise.

Liturgical revision/expansion recognizes that any single given prayer is part of a larger liturgical whole; no single prayer need bear the entire burden for expanding God-language.

It is especially important that principal liturgies (Holy Baptism and Holy Eucharist, Liturgies of the Word, the Psalter) engage expansive language.

- As we seek such language in principal liturgies, we attend to earlier liturgies that have offered expanded images, e.g. the font as the womb of the church.⁶

Liturgists ought not presume that there is only one pronoun for God.

We understand that in using language about God, multiple goods (ethical goods, moral goods, pastoral goods, theological goods, historical goods etc.) are in play, and sometimes these are in tension with each other. Those who craft prayers seek to attend to the assembly, the Bible, creedal statements, etc., and when, in the work of new liturgy, the demands of one of those is in tension with the demands of another, we acknowledge the tension and allow it to be generative.

LANGUAGE ABOUT/FOR HUMANITY

Inclusive Language

- Liturgical language for persons should reflect the diversity of all humankind.
- Liturgical language needs to recognize the history and lived experience of each community and the rich diversity that is present in those communities.
- All worshipping communities deserve to name themselves and have their names be honored. For example, a congregation may prefer to be called a church for the “deaf” rather than “hearing-impaired.”
- Prayers and liturgies should strive to avoid instances of cultural appropriation that are insensitive and even experienced as violent to the original culture. When communities do use prayers drawn from other cultures, such use should be sensitive to the original meaning and context.
- As much as possible, it is important to avoid binaries as standing for the whole of humanity. For example, “brothers and sisters” may exclude those who are gender non- binary.

LANGUAGE NOT REFERRING TO GOD OR HUMANITY

Metaphorical Language (e.g. light, hearing, seeing, standing etc.)

Those crafting liturgies ought to be attentive to ways liturgical language may have an implicit politics, may unintentionally arrange power, or may imply an anthropology in ways that contradict the Baptismal Covenant.

- e.g., Light vs Darkness, Sight vs Blindness

CONCLUSION

The transcendent God, who is at the heart of our liturgy and worship, “surpasses all human understanding.”⁷ Our language of worship therefore points to and evokes the mystery of God – God whom we cannot fully comprehend or completely imagine, and yet God who is revealed to us in words and images conveyed across “family, language, people, and nation.”⁸ The Church’s liturgical language is by its nature transcultural, contextual, countercultural, and cross-cultural.⁹ And the Church’s liturgical language is biblical, drawing on the stories and images of Scripture. Through expansive, inclusive and metaphorical language, the Church aims to participate in the mysterious abundance of God, and to speak to God in language that might delight the One who delightedly created diversity and abundance.

ENDNOTES

¹ Adapted from the ELCA “Principles for Worship”: <https://www.elca.org/> (last accessed October 2019).

² Adapted from the University of the South School of Theology, “Language Matters” (Advent 2018).

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ World Council of Churches agreed document 1982 <http://bit.ly/35hGNjt>. The Lima Agreement.

⁵ Adapted from the ELCA “Principles for Worship”: <https://www.elca.org/> (last accessed October 2019).

⁶ See, e.g., Robin M. Jensen, “Mater Ecclesia and Fons Aeterna: The Church and Her Womb in Ancient Christian Tradition.” in Amy-Jill Levine and Maria Mayo Robbins, eds., *A Feminist Companion to Patristic Literature*, ed. (New York: T & T Clark, 2008), 137-53.

⁷ Philippians 4:7.

⁸ Revelations 7:9. Book of Common Prayer 1979 Page 94 Canticle 18.

⁹ “Nairobi Statement on Worship and Culture,” in S. Anita Stauffer, ed, *Christian Worship: Unity in Cultural Diversity* (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 1996), 23-28.