



## Worship Resources: Frequently Asked Questions

### What is meant by inclusive and expansive language in worship?

*The worship staff receives a number of similar inquiries on worship-related topics from across the church.*

*These responses should not be considered the final word on the topic, but useful guides that are to be considered in respect to local context with pastoral sensitivity.*

*The use of language, especially, is always evolving. Language is an expression of culture that is shaped by many factors. Its use requires faithful reflection, humility, and discernment. Additional resources for further study are suggested at the end of this document.*

*The response herein may be reproduced for congregational use as long as the web address is cited on each copy.*

#### **Inclusive language**

In the ELCA social statement [\*Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action\*](#), “Inclusive language refers to the inclusion of all genders when referring to humanity or God.” For example, the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) translation of the Bible used in worship resources would not use “brethren” to refer to all people of God, nor “mankind.” While these classifications of humanity were used in the past, we now understand that using such language is limiting to the diversity of humankind and has been particularly harmful for women, girls and non-binary individuals because they are not included in these descriptions.

Many people have pointed out that inclusive language beyond the avoidance of masculine imagery for all humanity. Inclusive language also incorporates our language for one another in worship. In corporate worship we speak to and about everyone who is gathered, so *siblings, siblings in Christ, beloved in Christ, beloved of God, or children of God* is more accurate than either *brothers and sisters* or *sons and daughters* and allows us to recognize both ourselves and everyone around us, no matter our sex and gender, as part of the assembly.

*Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action* notes that “this church focuses ... on God’s delight in the diversity of creation, as well as God’s intention of equality, unity, and relationality within that diversity. God says, ‘Let us make humanity in our own image.’ Just as there is relationality among the persons of the Trinity, there is relationality between the humans God creates and between God and humans. This reading of the Scriptures promotes an understanding of human diversity that is not limited by either a binary or a hierarchical view of gender.” (page 18)

Every time we use gender-exclusive language, assuming that people “know they’re included too,” we send the message, often unintentionally, that they are not included or worth mentioning. By shifting language when needed in sermon illustrations, prayers of intercession, music, and all the ways we refer to one another in worship, we can speak to and welcome all who gather as God’s church.

When one refers to inclusive language, one tends to think first about gender. Other matters also call for our attention. This includes language around disability, race, or socio-economic status. For example, many hymns refer to “the mute,” yet this word can have negative associations. (For more, see this guide from the [National Association for the Deaf](#)). Careful thought should be given to language around those who are disabled / people with disabilities and words connected to ability such as “walk, stand, blind, see, mute, lame, hear.” It is also useful to use language that does not assume that identifying as disabled or having a disability is a negative thing.

Because of the diversity of disability communities, language approaches vary. Some members of the disability community prefer “[person-first language](#).” Yet other communities, such as many autistic individuals, prefer “[identity-first language](#).” As a brief example, a person-first approach would use the term “a person with disabilities” while an identity-first approach would use “a disabled person.” Generational differences and types of disability can shape one’s preference for the way language is used. It’s important to get a sense of your context to determine what is the preference for your community.

Another recent concern is the associations that come with the words “light” and “dark.” Scripture abounds with positive images of light, Jesus as “light of the world” being one of the most prevalent. Many of our liturgical seasons are deeply rooted in an understanding of the coming light (Advent) and sharing the light of Christ (Epiphany). Also, language used around Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter also can extol the light, associating light with life and darkness with suffering and death. While our daily experience still values the gift of light, racial history in the US has often associated darkness with blackness and only used this language with negative connotations. For example, Sunday school children’s activities will identify black as the color of sin. Yet scripture also includes passages that uphold the beauty of the dark or the shadows (Psalm 91:1 and 63:7 are just two of many). *All Creation Sings*, the supplement to *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, includes liturgical language that lifts up the gift of darkness (see especially Holy Communion Setting 12) as well as a topical heading “darkness” in the Topical Index of Assembly Song (p. 276). Recent worship helps such as *Sundays and Seasons* have suggested that we remember and name the gifts of darkness. Below is guidance given for intercessory prayer during Advent from *Sundays and Seasons* 2021.

In the Northern Hemisphere diminishing light, situational and seasonal feelings of depression and loss, and the metaphors we hear in the text can combine in our prayers to result in a fairly straightforward dark-equals-bad, light-equals-good dichotomy. We know we must and can do better. Christ is luminous indeed. Also, Christ is beautifully, vastly, deeply dark. Like the night, Christ comes to offer rest, peace, and healing. We need the darkness of Christ. We, and all creation, need seasons of winter rest. Include petitions in prayer that offer images of Christ’s presence in darkness as well as of the blessings that darkness, night, and winter bring. In this threshold season, include images that go beyond binaries and

dichotomies. For inspiration, read Austen Hartke’s article [“Nonbinary gender and the diverse beauty of creation”](#) in *The Christian Century* (April 16, 2018; [www.christiancentury.org](http://www.christiancentury.org)).

The desire to be inclusive reminds us to pay close attention to the words we use, knowing all of them are limiting and can never express the fullness of an infinite God beyond our finite words. Thinking about who is included in the words we use is challenging but necessary.

### **Expansive Language**

[Faith, Sexism, and Justice](#) notes that “Expansive language for God also includes language and imagery that is not limited to humanity.” In that statement, language that is expansive refers to non-human and inclusive language means including all persons of many genders. Expansive language is nearly always inclusive, but inclusive language may not be expansive. When we think of something expanding, the idea is that the mystery and depth cannot be contained; think of the great expanse of the ocean or of outer space. While something inclusive attempts to draw us in, making sure everyone has a seat at the table, an expansive view keeps adding leaves to the table. There is still more.

*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* offers numerous examples of such expansive approaches. At a baptism, the traditional wording drawn from Matthew 28, “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,” may be followed by this assembly response using expanded Trinitarian language:

Blessed be God,  
the source of all life,  
the word of salvation,  
the spirit of mercy. (ELW p. 230, #209, #210)

[Principles for Worship](#) refers to language as a treasury that is always growing. “The church continually builds upon the vocabulary of the scriptures, expanding the treasury of language and images to proclaim the fullness of the triune God” (Principle L-9). And “Encouraged by the twentieth-century revival of the psalms, as well as the study of the works of early Christian writers and poetic writings of Christian mystics, Christians in our day are reclaiming images of God that have been lost in many traditions, and they are expanding this treasury with contemporary words and images.” (Background L-9C)

### **Gifts and Challenges**

The deep treasury of images in scripture combined with language of our experiences of God past and present assist us as we continue to discern how to faithfully use language in worship. The triune God is a mystery that cannot be contained by human language. Our understanding alone is insufficient. We say, “God is bread” or “God is a rock.” Yes, we believe this, but no, God really isn’t bread or a rock. Yet, while not literal, we can still affirm that God nourishes and sustains us, that God supports and upholds us. For a helpful listing of diverse Biblical images, see “Scriptural Images for God” in *All Creation Sings*.

As *Faith, Sexism, and Justice* acknowledges, “moving beyond exclusive language and imagery presents a complex challenge, both personally and communally. Changing or expanding Christian symbolism may be both unsettling and life-giving. For instance,

paternal, maternal, or parental references to God may be liberating for some people but deeply painful for others. Despite the complexity, this church urges Christians to work together to confront the problem of exclusive language and imagery because these contribute significantly to patriarchal religious beliefs and practices.” (p. 54)

Many, if not all, of us will be challenged in some way by using more inclusive or expansive language in worship. Certain hymns or songs that use masculine imagery may have been central to our faith since childhood. In many ways, these can be individually treasured. Yet as young people (and people of all ages) are continually formed by what they hear, speak, and sing in worship, we are called to reflect on what our language says about God and God’s creation. We creatively and carefully steward the gift of language, trusting that “God calls all creation into being and gives people language as a way of responding to God and forming community.” (Principles for Worship, Principle L-1)

## RESOURCES

### [Frequently Asked Questions:](#)




- ↪ How is language used in worship?
- ↪ How do we make worship contextual?
- ↪ How do we expand our congregation’s hymn repertoire?
- ↪ How do we evaluate worship?
- ↪ Can we alter the language of hymns and songs?

Resources Available for Download on the ELCA Website:



- 📄 *Principles for Worship*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002. (Available in [English](#) and [Spanish](#)) See especially, “Language in the Christian Assembly, pp. 2-22).
- 📄 [\*Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action\*](#)

Resources Available from [1517 Media](#) / [Augsburg Fortress](#):

- 📖 “Scriptural Images for God” in *All Creation Sings*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2020, pp. 268-271.
- 📖 “Scripture and Worship” in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006, pp. 1154-1159.
- 📖 Burke, Suzanne and Martin Seltz, eds., *Worship Matters: An Introduction to Worship* Augsburg Fortress, 2012. (Leader edition and Participant edition also available separately).
- 📖 Burke, Suzanne; Julie O'Brien; Melinda Quivik and Martin Seltz, eds., *Leading Worship Matters: A Sourcebook for Preparing Worship Leaders*. Augsburg Fortress, 2013.

-  *In These or Similar Words: Crafting Language for Worship*. Augsburg Fortress, 2015.
-  Ramshaw, Gail. *God beyond Gender: Feminist Christian God-Language*. Augsburg Fortress, 1995
-  Streufert, Mary. *Language for God: A Lutheran Perspective*. Fortress Press, 2022. Forthcoming.

#### Other Resources

-  [Reconciling Works: Lutherans for Full Participation](#)
-  [National Association for the Deaf](#)

**Copyright © 2021 Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**

*This document may be reproduced for use in your congregation as long as the copyright notice appears on each copy.*