

## **SUPPLEMENT to The Blue Book Report**

**COMMITTEE ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN  
Executive Council  
The Episcopal Church USA**

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## **The Power of Language**

**Before reading further, make a list of five great, Christian men who have lived since the time of Jesus. Write their names here for future reference:**

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Words and the images they raise up have enormous power. Words define people and things, so they appear to be objective, but one can overlook or not hear the hidden or implied messages they convey. Words can hurt and oppress; heal or liberate; suggest meanings that restrict, eliminate or enhance one's alternatives. There is little question about what the words "nigger" or "boy" mean to a black man or "bitch" to a woman. The biases of a society or religion are embedded in its language and imagery.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the power of language and to advocate for the full range of language, scripture, imagery and tradition to be recognized and utilized within the public prayer of the Church and its educational processes. The fullness of a compassionate and loving God, as well as the history of women who have been faithful to that God, have heretofore been insufficiently valued to be heard in lections, liturgy and music when the faithful gather for worship. Women's presence is imperative to enrich and expand the corporate spiritual life of the Church.

### **Linguistic visibility**

In preparing a school dictionary some years ago, five million words were computer analyzed and, to the great surprise of the project managers, revealed that when the American culture speaks to its children:

- ♣ it carefully differentiates them by sex;
- ♣ far fewer references are made to girls and women than to boys and men;
- ♣ despite there being 95 men for every 100 American women, in children's books there are seven times as many men as women and twice as many boys as girls.

Language is an important issue because it is formative. Child development studies indicate that youngsters think in concrete terms until the age of 10 or 12. They are unable to think in abstract terms. Thus, the words they use throughout childhood form images, symbols and pictures in their minds that will stay with them for the rest of their lives. Our reality is constructed by and limited by the words we use. If language were not important, would people notice the substitution of a word here and there in the liturgy?

Words like "men" and "man" are supposed to mean "people" or "humans." But were any women on your list of great Christian men? This is an example of how words silently shape our thinking and worldview by making women and girls "linguistically invisible."

Check out the liturgy and music at your church next week. What do they tell children about God? About themselves? Does the language tell them – without question -- that they are created in the image of God? How visible are women and girls in the language both spoken and sung? What references are there to girls and women? To boys and men? What do clip art or pictures depict?

Look at materials used by the children's choir, Sunday School, youth and adult classes. Ask the journalist's questions: Who, What, Where, When, Why? Be aware of hidden messages: who or what is the central figure or concept? Is there a victim? What does the material tell you about the roles, participation and opportunities for females and males, persons with physical disabilities, people of color and minorities?

To Susan Thistlethwaite, a Chicago Theological Seminary professor, "linguistic visibility/invisibility" is a critical indicator of what's at stake in opening up what has been a white, male dominated culture. Our reality is constructed and limited by words.

The term "laymen" for years was interpreted to include white males only, thus denying baptismal parity to men of color and all women. This discouraged either from seeking ordination, election or appointed office within the Episcopal Church, and in the case of women prevented it altogether. At the same time, the phrase

“who for us men and for our salvation” in the Nicene Creed was said to include women even though it renders them invisible linguistically. Confusing?

### **The ancient adage:**

#### **“As we pray, so we believe.”**

“The way we pray really does shape the way we think,” the Rev. Dr. Leonel L. Mitchell believes. “The images and metaphors and just plain words we use in our prayer... tend to shape our faith and our thought. And since all are to some degree inadequate, it is best to have a good collection of them.”

What we sing, pray, hear and see in song, stories and sermons shapes and defines what we believe about God and God’s people. The “hidden message” syndrome requires us to focus on both the implicit and explicit content of our language, which often gives women the message that something is wrong with them and keeps them invisible--as the analysis for the school dictionary discovered. To overcome this, the fullness of both scripture and tradition must be integrated into our worship and everyday language must clearly include both sexes.

It is important to remember that

- ♣ The New Testament was originally written in the everyday, street language of that time rather than the formal Greek reserved for philosophy and history.
- ♣ Jews rarely addressed God as “Father,” an image seldom used in the Hebrew Scriptures. Jesus addressed God as *abba*, which is more akin to “daddy” than to “father.”
- ♣ Although the Scriptures contain over 100 metaphors for God, as the Church became empirical in the fourth century, it abandoned most of them.
- ♣ When the first *Book of Common Prayer* was published in 1549, it probably seemed appropriate to speak of God in regal terms. But 450 years later, that language and imagery are as unfamiliar as Latin was to the average person in the pews in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

### **English grammar laws and Richard Hooker**

In 16<sup>th</sup> century England, grammarian Thomas Wilson posited that the “natural” order ought to be observed in language. This initiated a series of actions emphasizing that the male, being the more important, worthier gender, should take precedence of order. Expressions like man and wife, brothers and sisters, men and women began to reflect the “natural superiority of men over women.” By 1746, grammatical rules determined that the male gender is more comprehensive than the

female; therefore male language is universal, generic. An 1850 Act of Parliament legally replaced the term *he or she* with a simple *he*. English is rare in having no third person singular pronoun that encompasses both genders; many linguistic quandaries stem from this.

Richard Hooker, the 17<sup>th</sup> Century Anglican whose *Ecclesiastical Polity* was the foundation of Anglican politics, shows the mind-set which had prevailed for centuries. In an argument for maintaining the custom of “giving away” the bride in marriage, Hooker wrote, “It putteth women in mind of a duty whereunto the very imbecility of their nature and sex doth bind them; namely, to be always directed, guided and ordered by others.”

In 1872 British courts found that words like “he” and “man” would include women when imposing a penalty but exclude them when conferring privilege. This was also true in membership and voting rights in Episcopal congregations well into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Across the Episcopal Church, terms in diocesan and national canons like “layman” and “vestrymen” were repeatedly interpreted to exclude women from office for over a century. The 1919 General Convention changed the language of the canons from *laity* to *laymen* precisely to prevent women, already elected, from being seated on the Executive Council. A change in this canonical language was necessary to finally admit women to the House of Deputies in 1970. The 1976 Convention voted that the ordination canons are “equally applicable to men and women.”

In the 1960’s-70’s, the many-denominational, International Consultation on English Texts (ICET), pioneered efforts to render women and children more visible. Later the English Language Liturgical Consultation (ELLC) reviewed ICET’s work and made further recommendations. Hence today we say “...was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became *truly human*,” rather than “became man.” As the Archbishop of Canterbury explained to the House of Lords, it is Jesus’ humanity that is important, not his maleness.

### **Another problem: biblical ignorance**

Carl Daw, a prominent contemporary writer of texts for church music, notes that “one of the chief stumbling blocks in our current efforts to move toward a fuller vocabulary for God is our ignorance and abandonment of our inherited scriptural tradition, which knows many more ways of talking about God than we customarily employ....”

Many do not know the stories of women to be found in the Bible or the rich feminine metaphors for God in the Hebrew Scriptures, because they have not been part of the story proclaimed in our Sunday worship. Use of the *Revised Common Lectionary* is a start, but much more is needed to enrich and deepen our worship.

One of the advantages of expanding liturgical language is that, as the Rev. Dr. Mitchell noted in *New Images of God*, it disrupts our easy familiarity with traditional phrases and challenges us to think afresh about what words really mean. "They call us not to abandon traditional faith, but to look and see what new and enriching patterns of devotion..." are available to us.

### Is our vision of God too small?

At the 1988 Lambeth Conference, Sarah Coakley told Anglican bishops from around the world that the heart of the matter about language "is a challenge to our vision of God. The central question to the Church is...are you in fact presenting to the world a vision of God which is too small?" The world's myopia was institutionalized hundreds of years ago when a Roman document, known as *Inter Signores*, invented the argument that one had to be male to represent Jesus. The patriarchy began to own the Christian god and to embed masculine ritual, language and practice throughout the orders, worship, theology and workings of the church.

But God created us as two co-equal genders, never intending that one would subordinate the other. Systematic and exclusive use of male God-language offers a very limited and distorted vision of God. It also promotes male dominance and superiority in both church and culture. A powerful way to build a culture that is inclusive of all God's people is the use of language that without doubt includes all. Such language challenges deeply ingrained concepts and biases and opens up the way to build a culture of inclusion.

Some years ago, a group of women leaders went to Senator Everett Dirksen to seek his endorsement and promotion of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). He told them to go back to their religious institutions---that once the churches and synagogues of America had changed their policies about women, he would support ERA in the U.S. Senate. The senator understood well how the Judeo-Christian religion had provided the ethical and theological ballast to "keep women in their place" for centuries. Today, mainline denominations endorse and support the ERA, while the expanding

influence of religious fundamentalism would bar its passage.

That the Church presents a very limited image of the Sistine Chapel god cannot be denied, but it can be rectified. That language has become a major force in the continuing struggle for accuracy, inclusion and baptismal parity has been recognized by the most recent body of theologians and linguists to prepare the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of the Bible, and those who produced *The New Zealand Prayer Book*, both published in 1989.

### The English Vernacular over 400 Years

The Introduction to the 1989 **New Revised Standard Version** (NRSV) of the Bible offers this explanation by the translators' committee:

"The publication of our revision is yet another step in the long, continual process of making the Bible available in the form of the English language that is most widely current in our day. To summarize in a single sentence: the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible is an authorized revision of the Revised Standard Version (1962), which was a revision of the American Standard Version (1901), which, in turn, embodied earlier revisions of the King James Version, published in 1611."

"... to continue in the tradition of the venerable King James Bible but to introduce such changes as are warranted on the basis of accuracy, clarity, euphony, and current English language usage" was a mandate given to the Committee in 1980 by the Division of Education and Ministry of the National Council of Churches of Christ, which holds the copyright to the Revised Standard Bible. The maxim was "As literal as possible, as free as necessary," and it held throughout preparation of *The Access Bible*, published in 1999 by Oxford University Press.

This version of the King James, then, "remains essentially a literal translation. Paraphrastic renderings have been adopted only sparingly, and then chiefly to compensate for a deficiency in the English language---the lack of a common gender third person singular pronoun."

Since publication of the RSV in 1962, "many in the churches have become sensitive to the danger of linguistic sexism arising from the inherent bias of the English language towards the masculine gender, a bias that in the case of the Bible has often restricted or

obscured the meaning of the original text. The mandates from the Division specified that, in references to men and women, masculine-oriented language should be eliminated as far as can be done without altering passages that reflect the historical situation of ancient patriarchal culture.... [M]ore than once, the Committee found that the several mandates stood in tension and even conflict. The various concerns had to be balanced case by case in order to provide a faithful and acceptable rendering without using contrived English. Only very occasionally has the pronoun "he" or "him" been retained in passages where the reference may have been to a woman as well as to a man..."

Editors Gail R. O'Day, David Peterson, *The Access Bible, New Revised Standard Version with Apocrypha*, Oxford University Press, Inc. NYC, Oxford, 1999.

In the Introduction to the 1989 ***New Zealand Prayer Book***, The Rev. R. G. McCullough, noted the diversity of the people who would use it and therefore, that it "must be a deliberate attempt to allow a multitude of voices to speak." He also observed how the fabric of society had changed over the previous quarter century and that: "Within the Church there have also been profound changes...[including] a continuing dialogue on the equal partnership of women and men within the Church. Thus, there has been an increasing need to choose language which is inclusive in nature and which affirms the place of each gender under God..."

"There has been an increasing awareness of the ministry of all the baptised people of God ministering in God's name. We know that we can function as more effective disciples in the world when there is no sharp division between those with different functions..."

"Through all these insights we have come to new understandings of who God is, and how God acts among us in our world..."

"Social assumptions are critical in writing liturgy, for we are apt to ascribe to God attitudes and prejudices which are ours alone. These become embedded within, and perpetuated by our liturgical usage. The dialogue about inclusive language has now moved beyond merely referring to humanity...we are back to exploring ways in which it is possible to address God. This issue was there long before we faced it. We have gradually been compelled in our pilgrimage to start searching for ways to address God in language that is other than masculine and triumphal.

**"The purpose of liturgy is not to protect particular linguistic forms.** It is to enable the community to

pray. We know that some people will consider we have moved too far in the language we have chosen; others will insist we have not gone far enough. What we present is one fragile moment in the relentless on-going process of liturgical change.

"Liturgy describes the People of God. Liturgy expresses who we believe we are in the presence of God. Liturgy reveals the God whom we worship. Liturgy reflects our mission. Since the earlier experimental orders, the imagery describing God has become more vivid, and more personal..."

**"There is freedom within the heritage.** Continuity is always in tension with liturgical change, but continuity there is. The intention is to extend, not break, the richness of our heritage... words are only a vehicle for the worship of God, so that we might reach for the things beyond the words in the language of the heart."

Becoming comfortable with expansive and inclusive language will help us develop more embracing ways to think and behave that honor women as well as men. This could have a profound impact on the violence women and girls experience throughout the world.

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