

COMMITMENTS AND GUIDELINES FOR LANGUAGE IN WORSHIP

Adopted by the Congregational Council in 2015

Background:

Three forces are at work in our use of language in worship. First, worship is a communal event. In worship, humans communicate ideas and deepen connections with each other in order to deepen faith. Written and spoken language is intrinsic to this experience. Paradoxically, the more we open our minds and our words to adequately describe God, the more clearly we understand that God is and will always remain beyond description. We must find ways to both speak clearly and to respect the limits of language. Third, some have experienced the use of language and the images words convey as barriers acknowledging that they are created in God's own image. Faithful, inclusive, and inviting language about God welcomes us all as full and complete children of God.

Our faith is grounded in scripture and tradition, also communicated to us by language. Scripture translations have evolved through careful study of the original language, and tradition has evolved based on the needs and insights of each new era of the church. This dynamic process reflects and nurtures our living faith. Each new generation is called to carefully consider scriptural images and messages as well as tradition and doctrine as it seeks language for God, alive in its particular context.

One example of development over time comes from the recognition that a patriarchal culture gave birth to the writing of scripture and the selection of the canon. Unless the language is adjusted as we use scripture in the more inclusive culture of the 21st century, the worship service can be an alienating rather than a welcoming and evangelizing experience.

Commitments about the use of language:

1. The community of Pilgrim Lutheran commits to the use of expansive language for God. We recognize that we are called to name and praise God who is both timeless and alive in particular ways in our time, and to do so in a way that enhances the ritual expression of the community. We humbly accept that even these attempts will be neither sufficient nor complete.
2. The community of Pilgrim Lutheran commits to the use of inclusive language for humans. We understand that humans are made in the image of God, and we also claim that valuing the diversity of human life is a manifestation of love for the Creator and of the Creator's love for us.
3. The community of Pilgrim Lutheran commits to opening the descriptors we use for God and our life together beyond anthropomorphic boundaries. We celebrate that the vastness of creation begins to describe the vastness of the Creator.
4. The community of Pilgrim Lutheran commits to using nonviolent language for God and about our life together. We are called by the Gospel to create the reign of God on earth, and

understand that peace is the basis for and product of our life in God.

5. The Pilgrim community accepts the responsibility to heed and respect each other as we forthrightly confront the difficulties associated with varieties of theological language, particularly the reality that language near and dear to some is experienced as excluding by others, and as we wrestle with formulations of belief which are not easily expressed.

Guidelines for living into these commitments: *

Worship shapes and reflects our community life. In their roles in worship and teaching, as well as in community conversation, worship leaders, preachers, lectors, forum presenters, prayer leaders at meetings and other gatherings, Sunday school teachers, youth group leaders and community members will seek to

1. Use language that is expansive in communicating the nature and activity of God.

Consider using one or more of the following strategies:

- ☐ Choose non-anthropomorphic language for God (examples: Eagle, baker, hen, bread), being careful not to limit these by following them with male or female pronouns.
- ☐ Choose titles that suggest the activity of God but do not imply gender. (Examples: Advocate, Healer, Refuge, Sustainer, Creator)
- ☐ Use second person language to speak to, instead of about, God.
- ☐ Use similes
- ☐ Replace pronouns with articles (for example, "God sent His Son" could be changed to "God sent The Son")
- ☐ Keep in mind that although Jesus was male, his humanity is more significant to our faith than his gender. Consider using terms like Christ, Teacher, Emmanuel, Savior, Redeemer, Word in addition to or as substitute for Lord or other exclusively male descriptors.

2. Use language that is inclusive in reference to humanity.

- ☐ Avoid language that refers to the gender, marital status, race, age or physical ability of persons unless it is specifically relevant
- ☐ Use language in such a way that gender, race, ethnicity, age, physical ability, educational attainment, financial status, and national origin not become word barriers to persons in recognizing that they are created in the image of God and are included among the people of God.
- ☐ Avoid the use of pejorative language and imagery regarding different physical conditions and abilities of persons.
- ☐ Avoid language that may be understood as pejorative or persons when referring to color (examples include "the darkness of evil, blacklisted.")
- ☐ Avoid language that creates or reinforces stereotypes (examples: the color, race ethnicity or physicality of persons being associated with social status, elders being

infirm, doddering or no longer useful, young people as being rash or important only as the future, traits of nurturing or decisiveness being assigned by gender.

- ☐ Include appropriate female references in scripture stories that solely reference men (examples: Sarah and Abraham, Jacob, Leah and Rachel).

*We are grateful for the generosity of the United Church of Christ in inviting the use/adaptation of their covenant regarding the use of language in worship. Much of the language and structure of these commitments and guidelines is from that covenant. Material from the ELCA “How is language used in worship?” is also incorporated here. See the full response to that question at www.elca.org in the Frequently Asked Questions section.