

# Thinking About the Language We Use in Worship



A study prepared by the  
Knox Centre for Ministry and Leadership

This document is intended as a resource for the Church. The information it contains is not prescriptive. The *Book of Order* and its subordinate standards contain the Church's official rules and directions. Any perceived conflict between the information contained in this resource and the Church's *Book of Order* and subordinate standards is entirely unintentional.

**Cover:** Photograph of sculpture in Oamaru stone, housed at the Knox Centre for Ministry and Leadership in Dunedin. The sculpture is entitled "Love's Sacred Journey" by Carol Ann Thorley, an ordinand in training at the School of Ministry, Knox College 2001-2002. The sculpture was completed in 2001.

## **Foreword**

In 2010, the General Assembly asked the Knox Centre for Ministry and Leadership to prepare a study resource on inclusive language in worship. This follows a decision of the 1993 General Assembly to encourage the use of inclusive language in churches, and the provision a year later by the Church Worship Committee of a set of guidelines on inclusive language in worship. Despite the committee being invited to “monitor the use of our language” and “help us to maintain this commitment,” little appears to have happened between then and now, and the committee has long ceased to exist. In asking the Knox Centre to provide a study resource on the subject, the 2010 General Assembly clearly felt there is a renewed need to encourage sensitive and careful use of language in our life and worship as a church. Indeed, knowing the power of words to shape human life, it is good to pause from time to time and to reflect on the language we use.

As we prepared this study resource we were mindful of the many different contexts in which this subject might be discussed. Some people and cultural groups will be more aware of the history of discussion and debate around this issue than others. Some people will feel strongly about it; others will wonder what all the fuss is about. The variety of contexts and responses has exercised considerable influence on decisions that had to be made concerning the form, content and length of this study resource. We have opted for a commentary style interspersed with questions for reflection and discussion that does not presume knowledge of the academic debates around the issue of inclusive language.

Although the writing of this resource has been a collaborative exercise incorporating feedback from over thirty women and men of varying cultures and theological perspectives, as well as from the Leadership Subcommittee and Doctrine Core Group of our church, it is impossible to produce a definitive document that transcends the particularity of context. Indeed, the usefulness of this resource will depend very much on the wisdom and commitment of those who adapt it for their situation. We envisage it being used primarily as a basis for small group discussions, but also as a basis for personal reflection by those charged with the responsibility of conducting worship.

By making it an online resource we are able to continually update and refine it in response to feedback. To this end, if you have suggestions to make as to how the resource might be strengthened and developed further, please email: [principal@knoxcentre.ac.nz](mailto:principal@knoxcentre.ac.nz)

*Graham Redding*

*November 2011*

## **What is inclusive language?**

It is a way of using language that avoids the use of certain expressions or words that might be considered to inappropriately or unintentionally exclude particular groups of people,

especially gender-specific words, such as “man”, “mankind”, and masculine titles, metaphors, images and pronouns for God, the use of which might be considered to exclude women or portray God as a male.

Why is this an important issue? For at least two reasons. Firstly, language shapes our thoughts, perspectives and opinions. Words matter because they not only reflect reality, they also shape what we believe about what is real, true and good. Secondly, if we truly believe that all human beings, male and female together, are made in the image of God, then it is important that we do not give any other impression in the way we express the richness and variety of our God-language. The risk is to limit the scope of the Good News.

*Do you ever talk about the language used in church?*

*How do you think the language we use shapes our faith and how we think about God?*

*What ways of talking or thinking about God do you like or don't like? Why do you think this is so?*

### **Biblical considerations**

The Old Testament deploys a surprising range of images, metaphors and names for God – for example, Rock, Fortress and Deliverer (Psalm 18:2), Shepherd (Psalm 23:1), Light and Stronghold (Psalm 27:1), Keeper and Shade (Psalm 121:5), Lion and Leopard (Hosea 13:7), Lord of Hosts (Isaiah 9:7), Creator of both male and female in God's image (Genesis 1:26-27);

motherly comforter and nurser of children (Isaiah 66: 12-13; Isaiah 49: 15); mother bird sheltering her young under her wings (Psalm 36: 7); a mother crying out in childbirth (Isaiah 42: 14); Birth-giver (Deuteronomy 32: 18; Numbers 11: 12; Psalm 90: 2; Isaiah 46: 3-4); Seamstress (Genesis 3:21); Midwife (Psalm 22:9).

In the New Testament, we see the emergence of Trinitarian language, not in a way that renders obsolete all previous ways of describing and addressing God in the Hebrew Scriptures, but rather in a way that expresses the fullness of God's self-disclosure in the person and work of Christ. Although the New Testament does not provide us with a fully developed doctrine of God as such, it is clear that from very early on in the life of the church God was increasingly understood as Triune<sup>1</sup> – Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

It is the specifically male designations of Father and Son, and the related titles of King, Lord and Son of Man in relation to Jesus, that have been called into question in recent decades. Do masculine titles, metaphors, images and pronouns project on to God a maleness that leaves little or no room for the many feminine divine images and metaphors found in scripture? Do they imply that God is male or that men reflect the image of God more fully than women? Do they reinforce culturally determined notions of male authority and the superiority of men over women?

*What do you think? Take a few minutes to discuss these questions.*

Now turn to **Luke 15:11–32**.

This parable is often called the parable of the prodigal son, but it should perhaps more accurately be known as the parable of the two sons, or even the parable of the forgiving father, because it consists of two parts and the father is the key figure in both. The main thing to note is that there is not a trace of patriarchal<sup>2</sup> power in the actions and character of the father. There is only unconditional love – love that welcomes the prodigal home in an overwhelming

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<sup>1</sup> "Tri" = 3; "une" = 1. "Triune" is theological shorthand for saying "one God in three Persons". Other monotheistic religions like Judaism and Islam also say there is one God, but Christianity is unique in identifying the oneness and unity of God with a community of Persons – Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

<sup>2</sup> The word "patriarchal" is used several times in this study. It refers to systems and organisations – including religious systems and church organisations – that are dominated by men and attitudes and practices that favour men, a significant concept to keep in mind as we discuss these issues.

display of forgiveness and hospitality, love that longs for the elder son (righteous and resentful) to join the celebration of the prodigal's restoration and homecoming.

One can only imagine how the original hearers of this parable might have responded. This is a point well made by Kenneth Bailey in a classic study called *Poet and Peasant*,<sup>3</sup> in which he points out that the father in the parable acts in a way that contradicts the cultural norms of Jesus' day. All authoritarian notions of fatherhood and of God are totally subverted by this parable.

Now turn to **Philippians 2:1–11**.

Note how Jesus is portrayed in this passage. The One to whom every knee will eventually bow and whom every tongue will confess as Lord, the One who is in the very form of God, has emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, humble and obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross. The Lordship of Jesus is not to be equated with a raw display of power, but rather with a life of suffering love. British song-writer Graham Kendrick summed it up well in one of his worship songs, which goes by the simple title of “The Servant King”. Jesus is the One who came not to be served, but to serve. He is the servant King, the suffering Lord.

What we see in these and similar passages of scripture are titles that might be considered patriarchal according to a given culture are redefined in the context of God's self-disclosure in Jesus Christ. Words like “Father”, “Son”, “Master”, “King” and “Lord” are given new meaning.

Over the years, some of our forebears in the faith, both women and men, have sought to creatively express their insight into God and God's love. Some of these metaphors and analogies might seem strange or unusual, but they all seek to capture something about the nature of God as revealed to us. For example, in speaking of God's maternal love, a second-century theologian Clement of Alexandria drew the complementary aspects of motherhood and fatherhood together in God when he said:

And God Himself is love; and out of love to us became feminine. In His ineffable essence He is Father; in His compassion to us He became Mother. The Father by loving became feminine: and the great proof of this is He whom He begot of Himself; and the fruit brought forth by love is love.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976. See also *The Cross and the Prodigal: Luke 15 Through the Eyes of Middle Eastern Peasants*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Downers Grove: IVP, 2005, by the same author.

<sup>4</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Who is the Rich Man That Shall Be Saved?* 37, trans. William Wilson, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (New York, 1905) Vol 2: 601.

Reflecting further on the femininity of God, Clement once referred to the "Father who nurses with milk from the breasts of his goodness".<sup>5</sup> Similarly, in 675 AD, the Eleventh Council of Toledo declared that the Son was begotten from the "womb of the Father".<sup>6</sup> Medieval writers, such as Julian of Norwich, also explored these images of God when she wrote, "And so in our Father God almighty, we have our being. And in our mother of mercy we are remade and restored. Our fragmented lives are knit together and made whole."<sup>7</sup> Here the elements of our broken lives are drawn together and healed in the love that is God, expressed in imagery that sees fatherhood and motherhood perfected in God.

At first glance some of these images are nonsensical, for how can a father breastfeed or have a womb? But what these writers from antiquity were saying is that we must not look to our own experience of fatherhood to understand the fatherhood of God – we must look to God's self-disclosure in Christ, as witnessed to in scripture; we must no longer look to our own experiences of dominance and servitude to understand the reign and sovereignty of God – we must look to God's self-disclosure in Christ, as witnessed to in scripture.

Here is part of a modern prayer that picks up the same sentiment:

*Gracious God of the loving heart, by whom all fatherhood and motherhood is named, Source of our own creation, you whose Trinity of persons all human bonding and richness of human community reflects, may your name be praised! ... Because of the boundlessness of your love, you opened your womb,<sup>8</sup> pouring forth your own inner life, giving birth to the world, and bestowing on it life like your own ...<sup>9</sup>*

Turn to **Matthew 23:1–12**.

*In the light of what we have just noted, what do you make of Jesus' instruction to "call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father – the one in heaven"?*

*What is it like to imagine a "heavenly Father" whose characteristics are much more holistic than some "earthly fathers" have been socialised to be?*

<sup>5</sup> Cited by Catherine Mowry LaCugna in her article "The Baptismal Formula, Feminist Objections, and Trinitarian Theology", *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 26:2, Spring, 1989, p.245

<sup>6</sup> Catherine Mowry LaCugna, "The Baptismal Formula, Feminist Objections, and Trinitarian Theology", *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 26:2, Spring, 1989, p.246

<sup>7</sup> Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 58 cited in George Tolley, *Julian of Norwich: Saying 'Yes' to God*. Cambridge: Grove Books, 2010, p.14. See also Charles Cummings, "The Motherhood of God According to Julian of Norwich." In John A. Nichols and Lillian Thomas Shank, *Medieval Religious Women: Peace Weavers*, Kalamazoo, MI.: Cistercian Publications, 1987: 305-14.

<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, the Hebrew word for mercy/compassion, "rachamim", is based on the word "rechem" which means "womb", thus implying that mercy/compassion was considered a maternal quality.

<sup>9</sup> *Flames of the Spirit*, edited by Ruth C. Duck, New York: Pilgrim Press, 1985, p.97

## Practical considerations and alternative formulations

One of the main arguments in favour of retaining the traditional Trinitarian formulation is that there is a certain “givenness” to it. Jesus addressed God as Father and instructed his disciples to do likewise. And in the so-called Great Commission the church is instructed to baptise in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19). Throughout the New Testament, God is not said to be *like* a father; God *is* Father. Jesus is not *like* a father’s son; he *is* the Father’s Son (see, for example, Mark 1:11). This does not mean that God is male; it simply means that these biblically-prescribed names and titles ultimately are bound up with God’s own self-disclosure and the patterns of relationality revealed and realised in Jesus,<sup>10</sup> as is evident in the intimacy of personal address embodied in his use of the Aramaic word for Father: “abba”.<sup>11</sup>

Both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament assert that God has a proper name. In the Masoretic Text of the Old Testament, God’s self-revealed name is YHWH (often translated as “I am who I am”). The identity of the one bearing this mysterious name is filled out in Israel’s experience, primarily that of liberation from Egypt and the coming into a land of promise. According to the New Testament, the distinctive Christian name for God is “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”<sup>12</sup> A report by a Study Commission of the British Council of Churches says of this name that God “is called Father, not so much when we are speaking about him, as when we are speaking to him. When Peter and Paul in their letters are doing their theological thinking, they speak about God, but when, as often happens, their thought takes wings and turns into praise and doxology, it is then that they address the Father. The source of such prayer to the Father is of course Jesus himself, all of whose recorded prayers – with one exception on the cross – begin with “Father,” and who, when asked for a prayer that would be distinctive to his disciples, said, “when you pray, say Father” (Luke 11:12).”<sup>13</sup>

That said, how difficult it is to refrain from projecting on to God our own culturally-determined and gender-based images and titles!<sup>14</sup> Regrettably, the church has for many

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<sup>10</sup> Colin Gunton, “Proteus and Procrustes: A Study in the Dialectic of Language in Disagreement with Sallie McFague”, in *Speaking the Christian God: The Holy Trinity and the Challenge of Feminism*, edited by Alvin F. Kimel, Jr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992, p.78. The Commentary to the PCANZ’s newest Subordinate Standard, *Kupu Whakapono*, puts it this way: “The names ‘Father’ and ‘Son’ indicate the profound inter-relatedness within the Trinity. In everyday human language, ‘Father’ means a male parent. But in relation to the Trinity, the name ‘Father’ has nothing to do with human biology (God is spirit, John 4:24) and does not refer to the gendered characteristics of human fathers. Jesus taught that the Father’s care for us greatly exceeds that of human fathers (Luke 11:11-13) thus indicating that the Fatherhood of God lies beyond the realms of human parenthood and gender.” (Paragraph 15)

<sup>11</sup> Janet Martin Soskice, “Can a Feminist Call God ‘Father’?”, *Speaking the Christian God*, p.90

<sup>12</sup> See: 1 Peter 1:3; Colossians 1:3; Ephesians 1:3; 2 Corinthians 1:3; Romans 15:6

<sup>13</sup> *The Forgotten Trinity: A Study Guide on issues contained in the Report of the BCC Study Commission on Trinitarian Doctrine Today*, London: British Council of Churches, 1989, p.5

<sup>14</sup> Some would argue that such projection is unavoidable. Mary Daly, for example, once famously quipped that “if God is male then male is God” (*Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation*, Beacon



people (especially women) been a place where patriarchal attitudes and actions have been endured and perpetuated rather than a place where they have been challenged, critiqued and subverted. For these people, their experience of church has, to varying degrees, been one of oppression rather than freedom.

This experience has led many people to say that we should find new ways of referring to the Triune God. For example, instead of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, perhaps Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer, or some such similar gender-neutral threefold designation would be better. However, that which appears to be a solution to a problem often turns out to itself be a problem. In this case, referring to God as Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer portrays God in terms of a *trinity of functions* rather than a *community of persons*. In classic Trinitarian theology, all three persons of the Trinity participate in creating, redeeming and sustaining, and each is more than these three functions.

Might the solution then be to refer to the Triune God as Parent, Child and Spirit? While this restores the primacy of persons over functions, it has the effect of depersonalising God and of uprooting our naming of God from the Biblical narrative. Addressing God as “Parent” or even “parenting God” is unlikely to catch on among those who favour in their prayer and worshipping life a more direct, intimate and personal form of address.

What about just referring to God as “God”, thereby avoiding all the controversy about which Trinitarian formulation is best, as well as avoiding the need for personal pronouns (“He” and “Him”)? Well, again there is the problem of depersonalising God. Moreover, repeated use of the gender-neutral but undifferentiated and impersonal designation “God” tends to imply a Unitarian doctrine of God, with a consequent loss of the richness of Trinitarian theology and worship. The other concern here would be that such a decision (i.e., of simply referring to God as “God”) neglects the Church’s belief in the reality that God has been self-revealed/introduced to us by name (as noted above).<sup>15</sup>

Yet another possibility is to counter-balance all the male titles for God with female ones. So, for example, God might be referred to as Mother as well as Father, or even Mother-Father God. The problem here, though, is that this approach simply perpetuates a gender-based

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Press, 1985, p. 9). There has been much debate ever since then about the veracity of Daly’s claim. Is the projection of male attributes on to God an inevitable consequence of calling God “Father” and Jesus “Lord”, or is it an ever-present (but avoidable) danger? This is an interdisciplinary discussion involving several fields of academic inquiry, including the psychology of religion, the philosophy of language, biblical studies and theology. There is a variety of viewpoints.

<sup>15</sup> Whether “Father” is a proper name or a metaphor is a matter of ongoing theological debate. Those who say it is a proper name place considerable weight on the instruction and example of Jesus, the One in whom the fullness of God was pleased to dwell (Colossians 1:19). Those who say it is a metaphor tend to argue that it is just one form of divine address among many in the Bible, and that it functions in precisely the same way as other biblical metaphors, displaying both similarity and dissimilarity between two things being compared. According to this view, God is like a human father in some respects and not like a human father in other respects.

projection of certain attributes on to God.<sup>16</sup> God is portrayed as being both male and female, whereas in truth God is neither male nor female.

Maori and Pacific Island cultures offer yet more perspectives. Wayne Te Kaawa<sup>17</sup> writes:

The term commonly used for God in Maori is “Io”, the parentless one. When the missionaries arrived they asked, “What or who is God to us?” The response was AIO, A = father, O = mother and I = child. When pronounced as AIO it means, “peace to you”. The missionaries thought that this was too close to a Trinitarian understanding of God for a primitive people and changed the Maori name for God (AIO) to Io. But the real word for God is AIO.

The other Maori term commonly used for God is “Atua”, which actually is incorrect. “Atua” consists of two parts: “atu”, which means “away from here”; and “tua”, which means “the other side of life”. So Atua means “away from here, not of the physical”.

So, in a sense, for us it is a matter of correcting understanding and recapturing some of the original meaning. Using the term AIO touches a wellspring deep within our Maori being in a way that non-Maori language cannot, but that is true of every people and their language regardless of who they are or where they are.

And Fei Taule’ale’ausumai-Davis<sup>18</sup> writes:

When Samoans speak of the Trinity, it is translated as “The Three in One,” Le Tolu Tasi Paia. Literally this is “the Three One Holy”. To speak of the Trinity as Father, Son and Holy Spirit in Samoan is “Le Tamā, le Alo, ma le Agaga Paia or Sā, both Paia and Sā being words for “Holy” and “Sacred.” The “Son” is translated as “child,” so it is inclusive and not gender-specific. It is also a term for both male and female children in the formal sense. “Alo” is the polite word one uses to address another’s children respectfully. References to God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit are always capitalized to denote supremacy and superiority over all other gods, spirits and deities. Jesus as the Son of Man is translated inclusively in Samoan as Jesus as the Son of People: “Le Atali’i o Tagata.”

What all this theological and cultural diversity indicates is that there is no perfect solution. All language for God is problematic to one degree or another, reflecting perhaps the accuracy of the Apostle Paul’s observation that “for now we see in a mirror dimly” as we await the day when we will see God “face to face.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> The use of the double-barrelled name “Mother-Father God” has a double disadvantage: it is clumsy liturgically, and it suggests that the names are not really names at all, but rather descriptors.

<sup>17</sup> Wayne Te Kaawa is the Director (Te Ahorangi) of Te Wananga a Rangi and currently Moderator of Te Aka Puaho. This quote is from personal email correspondence dated 28 June 2011.

<sup>18</sup> Fei is a Samoan Presbyterian minister in Auckland. This quote is taken from personal email correspondence dated 1 November 2011.

<sup>19</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:12

*Think about the various approaches described above. What additional advantages and disadvantages can you identify in relation to each, as well as the traditional formulation of Father, Son and Holy Spirit?*

*What other options might there be, and what would be the advantages and disadvantages in relation to these?*

## **Supplementing traditional Trinitarian language**

Consider the following excerpt from a paper that was written for discussion within the Presbyterian Church of the United States of America (PCUSA) on this issue. The paper is called “The Trinity: God’s Love Overflowing”:

Faced with the alternatives of *never* speaking of the Trinity as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and *only* speaking of the Trinity as Father, Son and, Holy Spirit, we see a way that is more consistent with the scriptures and theological and liturgical tradition. The language of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, rooted in scripture and creed, remains an indispensable anchor for our efforts to speak faithfully of God. When secured, an anchor provides both necessary stability and adequate freedom of movement. If our lifeline to the anchor is frayed or severed, the historic faith of the one holy catholic and apostolic church risks being set adrift. With this anchor in place, however, we are liberated to interpret, amplify, and expand upon the ways of speaking of the triune God familiar to most church members. We are freed to speak faithfully and amply of the mystery of the Trinity. We may cultivate a responsible Trinitarian imagination and vocabulary that bears witness in different ways to the one triune God known to us from scripture and creed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Faithfulness to the gospel frees us to honour and continue to use this faithful way of speaking of the triune God even as it frees us to adopt other faithful images. Rather than simply repeating the word “God” in prayer and liturgy, we are free to broaden our vocabulary for speaking of the triune God, emboldened by the rich reservoir of biblical and traditional terms, images, and metaphors.<sup>20</sup>

What might this look like? The PCUSA paper gives plenty of examples, one of which is to suggest that in worship, as we strain to give voice to the holiness, majesty, and mercy of God, so our vocabulary of praise must be expansive, rich, and all-embracing:

“In praising the triune God we use biblical language, both classic –  
Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,  
and surprising –  
Mother, Child, and Womb.

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<sup>20</sup> “The Trinity: God’s Love Overflowing”, lines 328-342,  
[www.pcusa.org/media/uploads/theologyandworship/pdfs/trinityfinal](http://www.pcusa.org/media/uploads/theologyandworship/pdfs/trinityfinal)

We may use words that speaks of the inner relations of the Godhead –  
Lover, Beloved, Love,  
and those that speak of the loving activity of the Three among us –  
Creator, Saviour, Sanctifier,  
Rock, Redeemer, Friend,  
King of Glory, Prince of Peace, Spirit of Love.”<sup>21</sup>

One can sense in this brief excerpt a biblically informed imagination at work. The general approach taken by the PCUSA paper has much to commend it. It allows us to draw on a wide range of biblical images and metaphors without compromising our commitment to the Faith which we have received and which declares God to be Father, Son and Holy Spirit. As we have already noted, the Bible is replete with such images, similes and metaphors. Many of these are feminine images, as in Isaiah 42:14, where God is likened to a woman crying out in travail. This sort of image can be used very fruitfully in prayer to give vivid expression to the triune God’s compassion and yearning for justice.

However, care should be taken to differentiate between those terms, images and metaphors that are consistent with the logic of the Cross, such as the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 52 and 53, and those that are not, such as the militaristic God who commands the Israelites to kill their enemies, including women and children (1 Samuel 15:3). Not all images and metaphors are equal. Some can be appropriated with relative ease; others need to be qualified and critiqued in light of the Cross.

*Can you think of other examples where this might be the case?*

*What are some of your favourite ways of addressing God? Why do you like them?*

*In light of this discussion, can you identify possibilities for extending your range of options?*

For some people the idea that some statements in the Bible might need to be qualified and critiqued will raise the question of how the Bible functions as the Word of God. Dare we question what is written in the Bible?

If we read John 1:1–5 it is clear that Jesus alone is the Word. So when we refer to the Bible as the Word of God we are not saying there is another Word alongside Jesus. Rather we are saying that the Bible is the Word of God in a secondary or derivative sense insofar as it bears

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<sup>21</sup> “The Trinity: God’s Love Overflowing”, lines 630-639

witness to the Word (Jesus) who dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.<sup>22</sup> This “secondary” Word needs to be interpreted, not just quoted.

We get a sense of this when we read Luke’s account of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13–35). As they walk along the road the two disciples are trying to make sense of everything that has happened, but true understanding eludes them until Jesus (whom they do not yet recognise) comes alongside them and “beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he *interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures*” (Luke 24:27). The key thing to note here is that Jesus (the Word) interprets himself to his followers through the scriptures (also known as the Word). The scriptures do not stand alone. They direct us to Jesus. As we indwell the scriptures so we are obliged, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to listen for Jesus’ word to us. The role of the sermon in worship is to help us in this task. As with the two disciples, we listen and discern in the company of others; we listen communally to God’s self-communication in Christ. It is in the process of interpretation, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, that the scriptures become for us the Word of God.

*Do you agree with this portrayal of the Bible?*

*What else might you want to say in relation to the Bible being for us the Word of God?*

### **Thinking about worship (with a few practical suggestions)**

There are some basic things that can be done to make our language more inclusive in worship. These include drawing on a wide range of biblical images and metaphors in our prayers, using gender-inclusive versions of the Bible, such as the New Revised Standard Version, and avoiding references to “man”, “mankind” and “brothers” in prayers and sermons. In extempore prayers this is especially a danger – repeated use of “Father” and “Lord” in a way that is unnecessary and excessive. We would do well to be guided by the Lord’s Prayer, where God is addressed just once, not at the conclusion of every line or the beginning of every petition. Moreover, we should heed our Lord’s warning against heaping up empty phrases in prayer (Matthew 6:7).

Gender-exclusive language in many hymns and worship songs may be modified, provided care is taken not to so alter the substance and flow of the hymn or worship song that it

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<sup>22</sup> The PCANZ talks about the secondary or derivative nature of the Bible in terms of the Word of God being “*contained* in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments” – see the preamble to the act of ordination in the Book of Order.

destroys the integrity of the original composition. Where modifications are made, acknowledgement of such should be made in the order of worship.

While some people will welcome these sorts of initiatives, others will likely dismiss them as political correctness. For example, some might feel like saying, “Well, obviously, ‘men’ is used in a way that includes all humans. We know that is what it means, so why are you so sensitive?” Now, while it is indeed true that, in previous generations, the words “men” and “man” were commonly used to refer to all people, that is no longer the case. Language changes with the times, and this is one thing that has changed. In our view, people involved in the conduct of worship need to be aware of these sorts of changes, and they need to be aware that many women do feel excluded and disenfranchised by “men” and “mankind”.

Our concern for inclusive language does not mean that we must cease addressing God as Father or referring to Christ as the Son of God and acknowledging him as Lord and King. Nor does it mean baptising people in the name of something other than Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But it does mean that we use these traditional titles and Trinitarian formula wisely and sensitively, supplementing them with biblical images and metaphors, and defining them in the context of God’s self-disclosure in Christ, not in terms of our own culturally-determined experiences with all their inherent limitations and distortions. Following Jesus’ example, our faith-language should subvert patriarchal conceptions of God and religion, not perpetuate or legitimate them.

There is further scope to indigenise or contextualise biblical images and metaphors so that the Bible truly takes root in Aotearoa. Wayne Te Kaawa gives the example of referring to Jesus in prayer as “rata whakaruruhau”, which means “sheltering rata tree”. This is a term that is commonly used to describe a great chief. Like a great chief, Jesus is “like the great rata tree under whom we gather to shelter”. But unlike an earthly chief, “ka haere mai ki a matou no tua whakarere koe” – “you come to us from beyond this world”.<sup>23</sup>

Where significant changes are made to existing patterns of worship, they should be preceded by a carefully planned process of explanation and discussion so that congregations can see the logic of the changes and not feel they are being imposed at the whim of the current Minister or worship leader.

Why do we make the above recommendations? Because every service of worship conveys a certain doctrine of God. At some points in the service this will be explicit; at others it will be implicit. Language about God shapes the way we think about God. Think carefully about the language you use, not only in terms of what you want to say, but also in terms of how it is likely to be heard, especially by those who either have suffered personally from patriarchal attitudes and actions or are simply dismayed by the tendency in many branches of the

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<sup>23</sup> Email correspondence, 28 June 2011

church to perpetuate rather than challenge the myriad forms of patriarchy and oppression in our world.

*Do you agree with the above suggestions regarding the use of language in worship?*

*What others do you have for making worship more inclusive in continuity with the biblical and theological foundations of the Christian faith?*

At the conclusion of this study a list of recommended worship resources is provided, followed by a small selection of prayers that will help readers visualise the sorts of things that can be done to supplement more traditional forms of prayer.

### **Thinking about other forms of inclusiveness**

Consider the following quote from Catherine Mowry LaCugna:

Living what we promise in baptism and becoming a community of inclusiveness ultimately may have less to do with language than with ourselves. It is perhaps easier to see language as the culprit than to admit to the ways in which all of us, men and women, fall short of our obligation of charity to each other. Obviously, language shapes worlds of meaning and creates social systems. Therefore language needs continual reform, and we need to be scrupulously self-critical about how we use it. *At the same time, commitment to inclusive language must be matched by commitment to inclusive community.* The offensiveness of language should be one more inducement to self-examination, confession of sin, conversion of heart, and reconciliation with each other.<sup>24</sup>

While the focus of this study resource has been on the use of gender-inclusive language in worship, the above quote from Catherine LaCugna invites us to think about our commitment to *be* an inclusive community. What does this entail? What other areas of inclusiveness might it lead us to ponder? We often talk, for example, of being a multicultural church. But what does this mean in practice? To what extent are our services of worship multi-lingual and participatory for people of different ethnic groups? To what extent are our bicultural commitments reflected in congregational life and worship? Does te reo Maori feature in the language we use in worship? How welcoming and involving are we of people who are differently abled, physically and mentally? And what of youth and children? Or the elderly? Or those whose sexuality differs from that deemed suitable for leadership in our church? Or those whose morality and lifestyles are not condoned by the church? What does

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<sup>24</sup> Catherine Mowry LaCugna, "The Baptismal Formula, Feminist Objections, and Trinitarian Theology", *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 26:2, Spring, 1989, p.250 (italics mine)

the commitment to be an inclusive community mean for these and other persons who can feel excluded from the church? Interestingly, the root meaning of the Hebrew word for salvation means “to make space for” or “to be roomy.”<sup>25</sup> Bringing into a more spacious place, as the Israelites were brought into the Promised Land, confers the idea of deliverance. For whom are we called to make space in our context, and for whom will the experience of inclusion be a form of deliverance?

To consider these sorts of questions is to be faithful to a biblical tradition that constantly surprises us with stories of inclusion, including three striking Gospel stories involving women: Jesus’ conversation with a Samaritan woman by Jacob’s well (John 4:1-30); a Gentile woman of Syrophenician origin who challenges Jesus to expand his culturally-determined boundaries of care and compassion (Mark 7:24-30); and a scandalised woman who, in a sincere act of devotion, bathes Jesus’ feet with her tears and anoints them with ointment (Luke 7:36-50). Stories such as these encourage and inspire us to think inclusively and to ask ourselves where we may have inadvertently put up barriers of exclusion that limit or deny the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

*Beyond the issue of gender-inclusive language in worship, where do you detect barriers of exclusion existing that may not always be obvious but which are perhaps reflected in the language we use and the attitudes we display?*

*What might be done to address these issues?*

### **A concluding prayer:**

*O God our mystery,  
you bring us to life,  
call us to freedom,  
and move between us with love.  
May we so participate  
in the dance of your trinity,  
that our lives may resonate with you,  
now and for ever. Amen.*<sup>26</sup>

### **Worship Resources:**

Steven Shakespeare, *Prayers for an Inclusive Church*, Church Publishers, 2009.

<sup>25</sup> *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, edited by Kittel and Friedrich, p.1132

<sup>26</sup> Janet Morley, *All Desires Known*, London: SPCK, 1992, p.18



Ronald Witherup, *A Liturgist's Guide to Inclusive Language*, Liturgical Press, 1996.

Patricia Wilson-Kastner and Ruth Duck, *Praising God: The Trinity in Christian Worship*, Westminster/John Knox, 1999.

Janet Morley's *All Desires Known*, London: SPCK, 1992

*Flames of the Spirit*, edited by Ruth C. Duck, New York, Pilgrim Press, 1985

Iona Community (Wild Goose) liturgical resources, including *The Worship Book* (Revised edition, 1991), and *The Pattern of our Days* (1996)

Bruce D Prewer's *Jesus our Future: Prayers for the Twenty-first Century*, Open Book Publishers, 1998.

Ruth Burgess' *A book of blessings, and how to write your own*, Wild Goose Publications, 2002.

Dorothy McRae-McMahon's *Liturgies for the Journey of Life*, London: SPCK, 2000

Philip Newell's *An Earthful of Glory: Biblical Prayers, Liturgies and Meditations*, London: SPCK, 1996

Janet Nelson's *Let Us Pray: Intercessions following the Revised Common Lectionary*, Sydney: HarperCollins, 1999

Lavon Bayler's *Fresh Winds of the Spirit* (Liturgical Resources for Year A (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1986)), *Whispers of God* (Liturgical Resources for Year B (1987)), and *Refreshing Rains of the Living Word* (Liturgical Resources for Year C (1988))

### **Music Resources:**

NZ Hymnbook Trust books, including: *Alleluia Aotearoa* (1993), *Carol our Christmas* (1996), *Faith Forever Singing* (2000), *Hope is our Song* (2009)

*Church Hymnary*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, Norwich: Church Hymnary Trust, 2005

*Together in Song*, Australian Hymnbook Pty Ltd., 1999

Jane Parker Huber's *A Singing Faith*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987

Iona Community song books, including: *Heaven Shall Not Wait* (1987), *Enemy of Apathy* (1988), *Love From Below* (1989)

## For further reading:

If you want a good balanced book on the subject, we recommend *Speaking the Christian God: The Holy Trinity and the Challenge of Feminism*, edited by Alvin F. Kimel, Jr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992. This book consists of a collection of readable essays from a range of notable theologians, including Elizabeth Achtemeier, Colin Gunton, Elizabeth Morelli, Ray Anderson, Geoffrey Wainwright and Janet Martin Soskice.

There's also a useful paper by Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel called "Do Women Believe Differently?", which can be found in the book *Passion for God: Theology in Two Voices*, edited by Jürgen Moltmann and Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004, pp. 45–55.

On the subject of baptising people in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Ruth C. Duck has produced a thoroughly readable and thought-provoking book called *Gender and the Name of God: The Trinitarian Baptismal Formula*, Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 1991. She looks at the history of the baptismal formula and carefully considers a range of alternatives. On the same subject, but from a different perspective, there is an article by Catherine Mowry LaCugna called, "The Baptismal Formula, Feminist Objections, and Trinitarian Theology", which may be found in the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 26:2, Spring, 1989.

A full copy of the PCUSA paper "The Trinity: God's Love Overflowing" can be downloaded from the web: [www.pcusa.org/resource/trinity-gods-love-overflowing/](http://www.pcusa.org/resource/trinity-gods-love-overflowing/) Critical responses to the paper can be found in the March/April 2006 issue of *Theology Matters*, found online at [www.theologymatters.com/2006.cfm](http://www.theologymatters.com/2006.cfm) There is also a good overview provided by Daniel Migliore: <http://www.pres-outlook.com/editorials/5104.html>

## A Selection of Prayers

The following prayers have been selected from a variety of sources to model the sort of inclusiveness being advocated in this resource.

A prayer for **Advent**, based on Romans 16:25-27, which exhorts people to stand firm in their faith.<sup>27</sup>

*Immanuel, God with us,  
help us to stand firm in our faith  
and to go on discovering what the Good News is for us, here and now.  
Help us not to take refuge in words:  
other people's words, abstractions,*

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<sup>27</sup> Brian Woodcock and Jan Sutch Pickard, *Advent Readings From Iona*, December 19.

*bland formulations, churchy jargon.  
Surprise us with your poetry,  
your pictures, which are beyond words,  
your living letters, which are people,  
your signs, which are at once here-and-now  
and belong to all places, all times, all people,  
your wisdom, which can only be understood by the child in us.  
God of surprises, God with us. Amen.*

A prayer for **Epiphany**, based on Matthew 2:1-12, which describes the visit of the Magi:<sup>28</sup>

*O God, the source of all insight,  
whose coming was revealed to the nations  
not among men of power  
but on a woman's lap:  
give us grace to seek you  
where you may be found,  
that the wisdom of this world may be humbled  
and discover your unexpected joy,  
through Jesus Christ. Amen.*

A prayer for **Lent**, based on Ezekiel 37:11-14, which describes a vision of a valley of dry bones:<sup>29</sup>

*Spirit and Breath of Life,  
before you we recognise that our spirits are not fully alive.  
We have succumbed to the sin of despair;  
we have been lifeless, not lively, in our faith.  
Like dry bones, we are brittle and break under pressure.  
Breathe your Spirit of power into us,  
that our faith may be active, in word and deed,  
and that your name may be glorified in Jesus, our Christ. Amen.*

A prayer for **Good Friday**:<sup>30</sup>

*Merciful God,  
we meet each other today at the foot of the cross,  
as inhabitants of one world.  
We wait with each other as those who inflict wounds on one another:*

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<sup>28</sup> Janet Morley, *All Desires Known*, p.7

<sup>29</sup> Ruth C. Duck, *Flames of the Spirit*, p.33

<sup>30</sup> *The Worship Sourcebook*, p.610

***be merciful to us.***

*As those who deny justice to others:*

***be merciful to us.***

*As those who put our trust in power:*

***be merciful to us.***

*As those who are greedy:*

***be merciful to us.***

*As those who put others on trial:*

***be merciful to us.***

*As those who refuse to receive:*

***be merciful to us.***

*As those who are afraid of the world's torment:*

***be merciful to us. Amen.***

A prayer for **Easter Sunday**.<sup>31</sup>

*O God,*

*you gave your only Son*

*to suffer death on the cross for our redemption,*

*and by his glorious resurrection*

*you delivered us from the power of death.*

*Grant us so to die daily to sin,*

*that we may evermore live with him in the joy of his resurrection;*

*through Jesus Christ our Lord,*

*who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,*

*one God, now and forever. Amen.*

A prayer for **Pentecost**.<sup>32</sup>

*Lord, Holy Spirit,*

*You blow like the wind in a thousand paddocks,*

*Inside and outside the fences,*

*You blow where you wish to blow.*

*Lord, Holy Spirit,*

*You are the sun who shines on the little plant,*

*You warm him gently, you give him life,*

*You raise him up to become a tree with many leaves.*

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<sup>31</sup> *Book of Common Worship*, PCUSA, p.317

<sup>32</sup> James. K. Baxter, in *Collected Poems*, p.572

*Lord, Holy Spirit,  
You are the mother eagle with her young,  
Holding them in peace under your feathers.  
On the highest mountain you have built your nest,  
Above the valley, above the storms of the world,  
Where no hunter ever comes.*

*Lord, Holy Spirit,  
You are the bright cloud in whom we hide,  
In whom we know already that the battle has been won.  
You bring us to our Brother Jesus  
To rest our heads upon his shoulder.*

*Lord, Holy Spirit,  
You are the kind fire who does not cease to burn,  
Consuming us with flames of love and peace,  
Driving us out like sparks to set the world on fire.*

*Lord, Holy Spirit,  
In the love of friends you are building a new house,  
Heaven is with us when you are with us.  
You are singing your songs in the hearts of the poor  
Guide us, wound us, heal us. Bring us to the Father.*

Finally, a prayer to be made more Christ-like:<sup>33</sup>

*O Christ, the Master Carpenter,  
who at the last, through wood and nails,  
purchased our whole salvation,  
wield well your tools in the workshop of your world,  
so that we who come rough-hewn to your bench  
may here be fashioned to a truer beauty of your hand.  
We ask it for your own name's sake. Amen.*

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<sup>33</sup> Origin unknown, but often used in the Iona Community.