Worship Language Guidelines

Language has power. Language is also a powerful tool. It transmits facts, ideas, emotions and values. What we speak, how we speak, where we speak, with/to whom we speak, and when we speak can become “conscious snapshots” revealing the various influences moving in and through us.

Christians have a responsibility to bear witness of God’s “Word made flesh” through our language related to how we describe and include one another; embracing and enriching the myriad of ways God is described throughout scripture; avoiding and addressing biases that foster stereotypes; and taking seriously not to participate in harming others for whom Christ died.

When preparing worship materials (litanies, hymns/songs, sermons, announcements, prayers, etc), asking tough questions can be revealing: How is God’s diversity and richness, as revealed in scripture, revealed in this worship? How, when and which humans are included or not? Who is valued? Who may be devalued? What biases may be at work in the design of this worship? What biases ARE to be at work in United Methodist worship services? All are challenging and worthwhile questions to consider.

To help you assess what biases as well as how biases may be functioning, below are some categories to help you sort through your worship services:
Sexual bias – Both men and women have been harmed by biased usage of language. But the image of women has historically been diminished, if not denied, by the generic use of “he” and “mankind,” favoring the masculine over the feminine. A more accurate and honoring reflection of reality is language that specifies that both women and men are involved in “humankind.”
- God language – God is both male and female. Avoid gender pronouns when speaking of God or be intentional in providing both female and male pronouns. Insisting the God of the Bible is “He” denies the fullness of God’s revelation throughout scripture and is a theological practice of idolatry.
- Titles – Avoid identifying people by their relational “titles” such as “Wife of…, mother of ..., husband of..., father of..., daughter of ..., son of..., Bob Smith and Mrs. Smith..., man and wife..., etc.” Use full names of individuals.
- Pictures – Use graphics that include men and women/boys and girls, engaged in the full spectrum of life in our homes, work, play, sports, missions and school. Be aware of the dynamics within the graphics as to who the “givers” are and who the “receivers” are. Avoid gender, race and class stereotypes.
- Music – Assess the images and language in hymns and songs. Are there inclusive options that can be provided? Has there been additional and newer verses created for a particular “old favorite” hymn that may be more inclusive of the community? Are there a variety of images of God and humanity dispersed throughout the selection of music during a service? Consider: If this song was the ONLY proclamation made in the service, what is the proclamation? What other music provides a balance of imagery in the service?
- You guys! – No!...not all of us are guys! “You all!” is a great option, and a shout-out of gratitude to our U.S. southerners for “gifting” our U.S. English with this inclusive framing when addressing multiple sets of people.
- By spirit – Assessing language usage throughout our worship services is a matter of asking, “What spirit is being invoked, proclaimed and present?” Having an intentional review (monitoring) of the images and language for humanity and God helps a faith community recognize where their biases are so to direct attention where spiritual growth may be needed.

Racial bias – Racial divisions are often cited by one group of people to justify separation or oppressive treatment of other human beings. Racial stereotyping, through pejorative or joking references or stories based on presumed traits of nationalities, is not just “poor taste” but speaks to the assumed supremacy of one group over another. It fractures not only the Body of Christ but also profanes the unifying power of the Holy Spirit in and through all Christians.
- “White” and “Black” in theological language: Which is considered positive? Which is considered negative?
• Avoid picturing or framing non-white persons functioning in essentially subservient roles. Depict a variety of lifestyles, skills, historical and professional and artistic contributions, and living in diverse home and family settings.
• Be aware of the norms you’re promoting as acceptable, successful, worthy and “blessed.”
• Mentioning of a person’s race or nationality should be made only when it is necessary or important to the sense of the material.

Ethnic bias – “Oh you know, (a group) are just that way.” Such statements attribute characteristics of ethnic and/or regional peoples, fostering stereotypes and denying that every nationality is endowed with “fully human” attributes.
  • Geographical stereotypes are hurtful and taint our openness toward others. What images and locations are provoked when you hear the terms “Redneck?” Or “Bumpkin?” Or “Hillbilly?” Or “Under developed countries?” Or “Third World?” Or “Terrorist?” Or “Conservative?” Or “Liberal?”
  • While people from other nations may speak imperfect or accented English, this is not an indication of being uneducated or inferior. Avoid implying that English is superior.

Material & Physical bias – Language used to describe those who are recipients of care or are people dependent on other caregivers to support them, or their churches, can often reflect an attitude that they are inferior or “needy.” It diminishes the suffering they have experienced. In the human community, we are all dependent on one another to be fully human.

This resource is available at www.gcsrw.org.

These guidelines were drawn from a resource by The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. We extend our gratitude for their helpful Inclusive Language Guidelines, www.elca.org.