Expansive language is a spiritual discipline which seeks to create radical hospitality through subtle yet powerful changes to the way we use the English language in all areas of worship, speech and prayer. By giving intentional attention to the pronouns, images and names used in reference to God and humanity, leaders and preachers extend the gospel to those people who were once unnamed, ignored or even explicitly excluded from the Church’s proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ for all nations.

Exclusive language is any which demeans, discounts, or ignores the experiences and full humanity of a group of people on the basis of gender, race, ethnic group, class, age, sexual orientation, or differing abilities. The impact of this language is to reinforce worldly patterns of oppression and injustice. Because language shapes both self-image and relationships between persons, we seek to affirm the human community in all its diversity. We offer these instructions for ensuring language does not become a stumbling block, but invites all to know God.

Recommendations:

• Refer to human beings in ways which are either not gender-specific (e.g. “humankind,” “chairperson,” etc.) or which use balanced male and female terms (e.g. “she or he,” “all men and women,” etc.). Although the use of plural third person requires some creativity in speech, it is an acceptable alternative (e.g. “Sanctifying grace is active in all disciples; they are going on towards perfection” rather than “Sanctifying grace is active in the disciple, he is going on towards perfection”)

• Like most disciplines, expansive language will require time and practice. Give yourself and other leaders grace to err, name their mistakes, and try again.

• Take the time to practice alternative grammar or sentence construction beforehand. Changing pronouns is only awkward if speakers have put no thought into alternative forms of speech. Three specific grammatical tools include:
  • Rearrange the sentence: E.g. “God loves all of his children equally” can easily become “God loves all creation and each one equally.”
  • Change from talking about God (third person) to talking to God (second person). E.g. “God is great and he is mighty to be praised” becomes “God, you are great and mighty to be praised.” (This has an added benefit of recognizing the immediacy of God’s presence!)
  • Replace pronouns (especially possessive ones) with articles, e.g. “God sent His Son” can become “God sent the Son”

• When speaking about human beings, be careful to use terms that acknowledge the full equality of women and men rather than reinforcing assumptions of gender stereotypes, roles or male superiority (e.g. “pastor” rather than “woman pastor,” “nurse” rather than “male nurse,” “flight attendant” rather than “stewardess,” etc.)
• Language about God should be aware of a cultural tendency to emphasize the masculine pronoun and seek to avoid such limiting images. Practice non-gender specific references for God, avoid pronouns, and include non-personal images for God. Use a broad variety of Biblical images for God and include feminine Biblical images for God in sermons, prayers and songs.

• **Special note on language about Jesus Christ:** Jesus Christ – the human incarnation of God – was obviously male. Therefore, when speaking of Jesus, masculine pronouns make sense. However, references to God the Father, the Trinity, and the Holy Spirit, are excellent opportunities to utilize neutral or feminine pronouns and thus remind ourselves and our congregations that God transcends gender, having created both man and woman in God’s image (Genesis 1:27).

• In sermons and storytelling, examine the gender, race, and age of the characters in your stories. Who does the teaching? Who makes mistakes? Inclusivity is powerfully and subtly reinforced when the role models and Godly people in our stories embody a broad range of gender, age, class, ability, racial or ethnic characteristics.

• Racially and ethnically inclusive language rejects the equating of color with virtue and does not equate darkness with negative qualities or lightness with positive qualities. It also rejects the use of or construction of “otherness” in language that connotes superiority of the dominant group.

• Person first language is a term for language which rejects the identification of single physical characteristics with a whole person, particularly in the case of physical or mental limitations (e.g. “person who is blind” instead of “the blind person”).

• **Special note on Copyright:** Many authors and publishers are pleased to provide permission to adapt texts for non-sexist or otherwise expansive use. Others will not. Some are used with permission to adapt already existing. Use your best discretion whether to adapt, use or discard a song with exclusive language for God or humanity. However, if you cannot avoid using exclusive language in one song, consider balancing it out with other songs which highlight the neglected areas of God’s character. There are songs in the United Methodist Hymnal, Faith We Sing, Worship and Song, Zion Still Sings and dozens of other resources which include feminine or non-gendered images of God.

• Likewise, inclusive language referring to age, class, and other categories acknowledges the full humanity of persons and does not use terms which identify only singular characteristics of a person or group. (e.g. people who are homeless)