

Language about God and People

At North Decatur Presbyterian Church we believe that the gospel calls us to welcome and include all who desire to be a part of the Christian community. We believe that the language we use in the sanctuary, the classroom, and in relationship with each other should reflect that inclusiveness.

Jesus taught, ate with, healed, and welcomed people of different races, ages, genders, abilities, and socio-economic status. We strive to follow Jesus, welcoming and including all people in all of our similarities and differences. We recognize all people as children of the creator God, and strive to see and to hear one another.

Under the leadership of the staff, members of the community have engaged the issue of language and inclusion. The policy adopted by the session in 1993 gave good guidance to us [Attachment 1]; now, through our study we realize that our language should be more inclusive, more expansive, less binary, and more sensitive to the rich, God-given differences among us. Our inclusive language should extend beyond the boundaries of worship and into other parts of our common life, especially into our education program.

Language issues:

1. Language about people: Gender/transgender, race, ability, sexual preference, and age are examples of grounds upon which people have been excluded, even unintentionally, by the use of language. The language of our common life should include all people. For useful examples of this language see Attachment 2.
2. Language about God: While it is theologically unsound and possibly idolatrous to assign one gender consistently to God, traditional language about God emphasizes the masculine. However, there are feminine images and metaphors¹ for God as well as images from the natural world² in scripture. Language about God in our common life should be expansive, drawing upon the multiplicity of images available from scripture, tradition, and human experience [see Book of Order W-1.2005-.06].

Language use settings:

Worship:

1. The liturgy: The language of liturgy should be sensitive to the balance of tradition and inclusion. While this language may be drawn from scripture, it should also include all worshipers. Language about God in the liturgy should use a wide variety of images and modes of address that are inclusive of all people. The music: The language of the anthems and service music should also reflect inclusiveness.³

¹ Deut 32:18; Ps 131:2; Is 66:13; Lk 15:8-10

² Deut 32:11-12; Mt 23:37; 1 Jn 1:5

³ Refer to the Presbyterian hymnal, *Glory to God*, Appendix 2 for more on the nature of inclusive and expansive language in congregational song.

2. The scripture: The scripture that is used in worship is the choice of the preacher. The preacher chooses the version of the translation, or makes their own translation of the scripture, recognizing that every reading of scripture is an interpretation. Responsible translation with regard to language about people and about God should respect the formative role tradition has played for individuals, the multiplicity of the Creator, God's *imago Dei* in the universe, the evolving understanding and active presence of the Living Word, and the inclusive call of the Holy Spirit.

Education: Teachers should be aware of language issues both for people and for God. They should have reflected on these issues as part of their teacher training. The inclusive and expansive use of language about God and about people, while important for all ages, is especially critical for those in the early stages of faith formation. Effort shall be made to teach and use "people-first"⁴ language for persons and non-gendered language for God. For human beings, we will choose words that encompass all genders, sexual orientations, abilities, family formations,⁵ races, and socio-economic status. As a community, we will value diverse images for God drawing on the Biblical witness that covers images that are masculine, feminine, and gender neutral, represent the animal species, and natural phenomena [See Attachment 3].

Community: The language we use is meant to clarify, to communicate, and to build relationships with other people and not to make or affirm assumptions and unspoken norms. We encourage, therefore, choosing diction in our regular speech that does not assume certain levels of education, financial means, or ability. We also encourage thoughtful use of imagery that does not link physical traits to negative concepts (e.g. "dark" or "blind"). In general, we welcome a "people-first" approach to find language that reflects what people call themselves. We encourage members and visitors to take time to find out what words persons use to describe themselves and their experiences of the world while reflecting back an openness to use such language towards them.

Attachment 1; 1993 Inclusive Language policy

Attachment 2: UU Inclusive Language Guidance

Attachment 3: PC(USA) Brochure on Inclusive/Expansive Language

⁴ People-first language honors every person's ability, needs, and interests by describing what a person has and not what a person is. Examples would be to say "a person who does not have a home" rather than "a homeless person" or "she has autism" rather than "she is autistic," a "person who committed a crime" rather than "a felon."

⁵ Language such as "children, siblings, caregivers, and parents" avoids binary assignments to gender.