



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

Worship Formation & Liturgical Resources: Frequently Asked Questions

How is language used in worship?

The worship staff receives a number of similar inquiries on worship-related topics from across the church.

These responses should not be considered the final word on the topic, but useful guides that are to be considered in respect to local context with pastoral sensitivity.

The response herein may be reproduced for congregational use as long as the web address is cited on each copy.

Words have power. The power of words can be seen in the biblical story of the creation: "Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light. . . God said, 'Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind.' And it was so" (Genesis 1:3, 24).

In the New Testament, God in Christ is called the Word: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1).

Christian liturgical assemblies are gatherings in and around the Word of God, Jesus the Christ. Because God in Christ is called the Word, the use of words (language) in Christian worship should be given careful attention.

Language both reflects and forms human attitudes and actions. As language shapes and influences human perceptions, the language used in worship shapes and influences our perceptions of God. Because language is created and used by humans, it reflects the imperfections and limitations of humanness. Therefore, no use of language can ever totally describe or represent God.

The Language of Scripture

All of the versions of scripture available for use in worship are translations from the original Hebrew and Greek. The original texts should be consulted before making significant alternations to texts. Some translations of scripture use non-inclusive language, even when the original Greek and Hebrew versions do not. Therefore, it may be appropriate, for example, to read "people of Corinth," expressing the meaning of the original Greek, rather than the "men of Corinth" used in some translations.

Not all passages of scripture were intended to be inclusive. We must take care not to alter falsely the writer's intent. At times, the use of masculine terminology (or other gender-specific terminology) may be key to certain imagery used to convey a specific idea.

Many recent translations of scripture (for example, *New Revised Standard Version*) have incorporated the insights of the most up-to-date biblical scholarship to produce translations that are more accurate than past translations. They avoid the use of exclusive language not warranted by the original language texts.

Language for Humanity

Language that excludes, alienates, demeans, stereotypes, or misrepresents persons by gender, race, ethnicity, socio-economic class, age, handicapping conditions, or other classifications should be avoided in worship.

The use of masculine terms to describe humankind should also be avoided. While in the past, the "generic masculine" was understood to include persons of both genders, this is no longer true. Generic use of terms such as *man, mankind, forefathers, brothers*, are readily replaced by *human, humanity, people, ancestors, or forbearers, brothers and sisters*.

Language Describing God

Language used to describe God is just that -- descriptive, not literal. Scripture provides us with rich and expansive images to describe God, including: eagle (Deuteronomy 32:11-12) baker (Matthew 13:33) hen (Matthew 23:27) wind (Acts 2:2) bread (John 6: 33-35) rock (Isaiah 17:10) and light (John 8:12).

Assigning male pronouns to human occupations (such as judge, teacher, potter, guard) or to objects (fortress, rock, shield) should be avoided when they are used as metaphors for God.

Language Addressing God

In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus addressed God as *Abba*, "father." This address does not ascribe human male sexuality to God but is an intimate address that is suggestive of the loving and trusting relationship between parent and child.

The image of father used by Jesus draws upon the deepest and most human of all relationships -- that of parent to child. God traditionally has been called "father" in worship to convey the intimate relationship between God and the church. The metaphorical use of the term "father" continues to be used in worship, alongside many other biblical metaphors for God. However, because sin can distort even the fundamental relationships of parents to children, the image of a father may be difficult to comprehend for some who have experienced alienation in their relationship to a human father.

Titles that suggest the activity of God may be used to address God. Such titles include Advocate, Healer, Savior, and Refuge. Many biblical titles for God are also available; They include Adonai, Source of Life, Root of Jesse, and Alpha and Omega.

Similes may be used to address God. For example, "God who cares for us as a mother hen cares for her chicks" or "God, who watches over us as a sentinel standing watch by night...."

Second-person pronouns (you), instead of gender specific and third person pronouns, may be used to address God.

Language Referring to Jesus

Jesus came to earth as a male human being, therefore the pronoun "he" is used appropriately when referring to Jesus. However, the humanness of Jesus has always been viewed as more significant than his male gender. The Christological categories used by the church (human and divine natures, humanity and divinity) clearly show that the central doctrines of the faith are based upon Jesus' humanness, not his maleness. Although the use of male pronouns is appropriate when referring to Jesus, care should be taken to find other ways to speak of Jesus that emphasize humanness rather than maleness.

Language Addressing Jesus

The Scriptures provide many forms of address for Jesus. A significant confessional address is "Jesus is Lord." Many other forms of address using non-masculine imagery should be used along with masculine forms for balance. Other forms of addressing Jesus include using Christ, Teacher, Emmanuel, Savior, Redeemer, and Word.

Language Referring to the Spirit

The Scriptures use both the Greek neuter word *pneuma* and the Hebrew feminine word *ruach* to describe the Spirit. Throughout the history of the church, feminine pronouns have often been employed in reference to the Spirit. Some see this usage as balancing the masculine Father and Son references. Just as masculine terms are used metaphorically, so are feminine. The use of feminine pronouns does not assign human female sexual being to God's Spirit, which is beyond human gender. Care ought be taken to use diverse terms for the Spirit. In the same way that God is not always referred to in masculine pronouns, the Spirit is not always referred to in the feminine.

The Language of Assembly Song

Some hymns that were written before people became sensitive to the use of inclusive language can be modified to reflect more inclusive terms, but others cannot. Issues of copyright, meter, rhyme, tradition, and poetic integrity of the text are all factors. Each hymn needs to be evaluated to determine whether alteration is feasible. In some cases, new stanzas reflecting current language sensitivity can be added to old hymns. In some cases, particularly problematic verses can be omitted. In other instances, the traditional weight of certain hymns may necessitate their being kept intact and balanced by other hymns that are more inclusive in language.

Newly composed songs are not exempt from this issue, as many still use exclusive language for God and humankind. Many songs come from theological traditions that do not see inclusive language as a priority or concern. Such songs may not be best means of proclaiming the gospel in a Lutheran setting. For a helpful analysis of this issue, see *Sound Decisions* in resources.

The Trinitarian Baptismal Formula

According to the ecumenically received baptismal formula, Holy Baptism is administered using water and the name of the Triune God -- Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America Conference of Bishops, in their 1991 statement on the trinitarian baptismal formula, upholds this name as the name in which this church baptizes.

The ecumenical church is presently engaged in discussions seeking to expand and enrich language used to address the triune God. Such discussions eventually may produce additional formulations. Until then, the current baptismal formula continues to be the only one recognized in the ELCA.

RESOURCES

Frequently Asked Questions:

- ↪ Who is a Presiding Minister?
- ↪ How can lay people participate in worship leadership?
- ↪ How do we lead liturgy with grace and confidence?
- ↪ What is the pattern for worship?

Resources Available for Download on the ELCA Website:

- 📄 *Principles for Worship*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002. (Available in English and Spanish)
- 📄 Collins, Dori Erwin and Scott C. Weidler. *Sound Decisions: Evaluating Contemporary Music for Lutheran Worship*. Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Division for Congregational Ministries.

Resources Available from Augsburg Fortress:

- 📖 “Scripture and Worship” in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006, pp. 1154-1159.
- 📖 Burke, Suzanne and Martin Seltz, eds., *Worship Matters: An Introduction to Worship* Augsburg Fortress, 2012. (Leader edition and Participant edition also available separately).
- 📖 Burke, Suzanne; Julie O'Brien; Melinda Quivik and Martin Seltz, eds., *Leading Worship Matters: A Sourcebook for Preparing Worship Leaders*. Augsburg Fortress, 2013.
- 📖 Hoyer, Christopher George. *Getting the Word Out: A Handbook for Readers*. Minneapolis. Augsburg Fortress, 2013.
- 📖 Scharen, Christian. *Serving the Assembly's Worship: A Handbook for Assisting Ministers*. Minneapolis. Augsburg Fortress, 2013.

Revised January 2013

Copyright © 2013 Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. www.elca.org/worshipfaq.

This document may be reproduced for use in your congregation as long as the copyright notice appears on each copy.