

Issues on
INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

by Richard Bentley & Katharine Rumens

“We’re all brothers”, says the young man firmly and finally at the PCC discussion on inclusive language. Later at a social event he asks about my family. “I have two brothers, Elizabeth and Jonathan”. The young man looks baffled and moves away to find someone who talks more sense.

This paper’s aim is to encourage all those who watch words: in hymns, prayers, biblical translations, text books and the text of speeches.

And to support and encourage, especially when people feel isolated:

“Oh, you’re into all this are you?” “Am I the only one who notices this exclusive language?” “Is it up to me yet again to interrupt the habit of gender discrimination and challenge the patterns of behaviour which leaves its exponents unaware of the damage they do?” “Oh, what you call exclusive language I call inclusive”. “Why do you always have to be so feminist?”

We suggest ways forward

We are speaking from within our Anglican tradition and the centrality of liturgy to that tradition. It is an introductory pamphlet, and may encourage writing of more substance in due course.

Still beating our mangles into washing machines

Some progress has been made but the issue is still live. As we have long realised exclusive language is a symptom of exclusions that go much further. Not so much revolution as evolution – let us take heart that calling God “you”, for example, is barely 35 years old. Words change their meaning. Ideas change too: they need words which express them adequately.

We are not being realistic if we dwell in the nostalgia of the land of mangles, when the day of the washing machine has dawned. Yet archaic form is sometimes a reminder of holiness and mystery, and many of us use 1662 at times.

Nevertheless people dedicated to an open and generous expression of Christian truth continue to wrestle, both with the language itself, and with those who would obstruct the process. We need to take the faith of our foremothers and forefathers into the third millennium in terms which nourish us and hold meaning for those who rarely, if ever, come to church.

Fossil collecting?

Christianity is not a fossil, either in its beliefs or in its language. It has always been recasting itself in terms of contemporary knowledge, feeling and experience. It has to recast itself if it is to make sense to children, women and men and have a chance of contributing to human good. *If the church does not engage with this task, and do it, the church excludes itself.*

1. Language, liturgy and Christian formation

The distinctive ethos of Anglicanism emerged in a period of reformation which was characterised by even greater liturgical change than our own. We read in Cranmer’s introduction to the

Book of Common Prayer 1662: “Whereas St Paul would have such language spoken to people in the church as they might understand, and have profit by hearing the same; the Service in this Church of England these many years hath been read in Latin to the people, which they understand not; so that they have heard with their ears only, and their heart, spirit and mind have not been edified thereby”. The preface to the ASB of 1980 points out that “Christians are formed by the way in which they pray, and the way they choose to pray expresses what they are”. However, it reminds us that “words, even agreed words, are only the beginning of worship. Those who use them do well to recognise their transience and imperfection...”

“Liturgy is a principal process by which the Church and the gospel are brought together for the sake of the life of the world. It is consequently vital that its form wear the idiom, the cadence, the world-view, the imagery of the people who are engaged in that process in every generation” (Book of Alternative Services, Church of Canada 1989). For liturgy is the work of the people, women, men and children, and is a living, vibrant thing. Unless we honour the life and vibrancy of the work of the whole people of God, there is the possibility that in worship there is “nothing that translates into the reality of people’s lives”. (*“Why Christianity Must Either Change or Die” by John Spong*).

**2. Language and theological issues:
God, Christology and the Church**

The constant and uninterrupted use of language which is exclusive and used repeatedly can be intimidating or even aggressive: Almighty God, Lord of Power and Might, Everlasting Father, Dear Lord and Father of Mankind. Intimidation and aggression do not give life to the people of God called to grow in wisdom and understanding. We need to use the full range of biblical images for God, the tender and nurturing as well as the powerful. Yet we must recognise that our growing includes encouraging fresh expressions of language for each new generation. The gospel always has a reforming, reinterpreting edge to it. “Almost all of the language used in the Bible to refer to God is metaphor, with the possible exception of holy... There is no point in pontificating what metaphors like “God as father” ought to mean. If God metaphors become problematic for a significant group of people, it is pointless and patronising to tell them they ought to understand differently”. (*What Language Shall I Borrow” by Brian Wren*). God reveals the Godself to us throughout the scriptures as mother, father, friend, love, wind, fire. And for some God is more than static noun: God becomes dynamic verb. We may leave words behind entirely: “The more I walk

with God, the less words about God will do” (John Spong). The best God metaphors are those that move us deeply and enable us to encounter and be encountered by the dynamic dance of incandescent love that Christian experience names as Trinity.

Ways forward: changing awareness and practical issues

Gladys buttons up her coat with fierce determination and tells me that when she went to school men meant everyone.

The clergyman who welcomes us all with “Good morning, brethren” is put out at being challenged because “My wife doesn’t mind”. Recognition should be given to the fact that all change engenders reaction and sometimes fierce opposition. And fear. The preacher asked all the men in the congregation to stand up. The non-standing got the point, although previously they could have sworn they were men. The standing also began to see things differently, and perhaps less fearfully.

The new *Methodist Worship Book* (February 1999) states that “Inclusive language is now regarded as normative; you can’t get away with saying men when you mean men, women and children”. One prayer in the service of Holy Communion addresses God as “God our Father and our Mother”. As the New Zealand Methodist Church comes of age, freed from a culture of lords and ladies, a minister reports: “Our people experience shock and distaste where God is exclusively He and extolled as a fighting smiting deity”. We can look to good practice in other churches and other countries.

One strategy is to speak to those who lead worship with alternatives, for example, you could begin “Sisters and brothers”. Until 1808 public speakers began their addresses with “Gentlemen and ladies”, but since then the order has been reversed. We think people must have got jolly cross about it at the time; sometimes it is purely through use that word order slips off the tongue more easily. “His and hers”, “husband and wife”, “men and women” defy any overall sense of order. It’s just that the only time women and children ever seem to come first is when the ship’s going down. Another way in with the persistently exclusive is to tell them “when you say men I hear men”. Being a perpetual bi-linguist is a strain, but try singing and saying your own words – those standing near you will catch your drift. Friends: usage is everything.

Find ways to challenge each other. The most affirming and nurturing language is also the most apt. The desire to find the most apt and thus the most affirming language springs from a more fundamental impulse to acknowledge a more profound truth about persons: their likeness as human beings, and their difference – in this case *female* and *male*. Therefore always aim to use appropriate language. You wouldn’t use adult concepts in referring to children (or vice versa). Don’t use male concepts when referring to women. Adult male experience is inside knowledge only for adult males. Also we grow out of certain forms of expression; they may still have meaning, but not for reference to our current surroundings. So be as wise as serpents and as innocent as doves; coffee after church can be an exacting experience as we discover that we don’t all agree on the words that have been used in the service.

We need to operate in two areas

- i. Developing skills in the use of words and meanings, together with literary awareness and good style.
- ii. Deepening our theological awareness of the issue represented by the challenge to change and grow. This is an ongoing task. We have to maintain effort and momentum. As we do so we shall further increase our skills with language and our awareness of the issues.

Some suggestions:

- Discover kindred spirits and members of the congregation who have been to services in different English-speaking countries and different churches in this country where they were encouraged by the use of inclusive language.
- Take a critical look at the services you are using. Do you refer to men when women and children are present? If so why not get the PCC to agree to change to make the language exclusive? Celebrate good practice.
- Write articles on inclusive language and a wider range of images for God in your parish magazine or deanery newsletter.
- Ask for a debate on the issues at Deanery Synod.
- Have a look at the worship material of other churches, for example, the new Methodist Worship Book.
- Consider the language of hymns and take a look at the changes to inclusivity made in such hymn books as that of the Baptist Church (Baptist Hymnal) and the United Reform Church (Rejoice and Sing).
- In house groups use prayers from Jim Cotter’s books or Janet Morley’s anthologies and then discuss the reaction of the group.
- Press your General Synod representatives to speak and vote in favour of inclusive language for God and for people.

You may be helped by the following publications:

What language shall I borrow? Brian Wren, SCM, 1989
Sexism and Godtalk Rosemary Radford Ruether, SCM, 1983
Making Women Visible General Synod misc 1989
Human Rites Hannah Ward & Jennifer Wild, Mowbray
Celebrating Women Ed Ward, Wild & Morley, SPCK, 1995
All Desires Known Janet Morley, SPCK, 1992
Women Included The St Hilda Community, SPCK, 1996
Caris Publications Jim Cotter
Association for Inclusive Language Publications 36 Court Lane, London SE21 7DR

*Those who work for change suffer resistance
So make us strong.
Those who do new thing sometimes feel afraid
So make us brave.
Those who challenge the world as it is arouse anger
So grant us inner peace.
Those who live joyfully are envied
So make us generous.
Those who try to love encounter hate
So make us steadfast in you.
(from Women Included)*

