Inclusive and Expansive Language

In 1984 General Assembly agreed by a small majority to use gender inclusive language in our publications for people but not for the deity. Rejoice and Sing and our Prayer Handbooks reflect that decision. Some of our churches still find inclusive language for people strange and other churches find the use of 'man' as if it were a generic term for men and women equally strange. Perhaps it is worth reminding ourselves that every Bible we use in English or Welsh is a translation of something written down many centuries ago and copied many times in a language, Hebrew or Greek, which is entirely different in structure from our modern languages. And every translation reflects the context, beliefs and language of when it was translated.

Inclusivity is not just a question of gender, although we have sometimes used it as if it were. It is a fundamental issue of social justice. Language that is truly inclusive affirms sexuality, ethnic and cultural background, stages of maturity, and degrees of limiting conditions. It shows respect for all people. Scripture proclaims the world is created, redeemed, and sustained by the Word of God, and the church attests to the power of language and words, recognising that words have the power to exploit and exclude as well as affirm and liberate.

In 1984 the question of the language we use for God seems to have been one that the United Reformed Church could not face. But times have changed and many churches and ministers seek to ensure that male pronouns for God are not used, because God is neither male nor female. Other ministers and churches continue to use male language for God. Does it make a difference to you that the pronouns you use for God are either the same as, or never the same as, the pronouns you use for yourself? While it is not always easy, it is possible not to use male pronouns for God.

But what about the descriptive words we use for God?
"We need language that gives us a fuller picture of the God who birthed us. Then the world will be a softer, safer place and God a God big enough to be worthy enough of belief." [Joan Chittister]

How do we think about who and what God is, what the spirit of God is like? Which words and images do we use to describe a God beyond language and pictures? How is the mystery and greatness of God conveyed in metaphors that nourish and sustain us? Which words do you use to speak to God, to speak of and about God? Are they primarily male adjectives, monarchical nouns, words of habit? In worship, singing, preaching, teaching, and church documents does your language and imagery for God embrace many meanings? Do you use words with and without gender, words of inclusivity and wholeness?

Words are a human construct. They impact and affect us differently. Each of us knows that words can wound deep. At the same time we also know that words have the power to transform, to inspire, and to bring life. Hence, how we speak of and represent God is always a necessary and timely question, lest we continue to misrepresent the Divine.
Expansive language aims to use as many names and metaphors for God as possible - to stretch the imagination towards God, in order to allow us to discover that there is novelty, challenge and joyful surprise in our encounter with the Divine. Limiting our language for political, pastoral or personal reasons, we run the risk of domesticating God, or even of making God in our own image. Expansive language with its broader range of words and metaphors opens up many more possibilities. Rather than excluding or excising difficult terms, they are brought into balance by contextualising them within a broad range of language that doesn't privilege

one name above another. Formulations such as Creator-Redeemer-Sustainer become less loaded with theological problems if they are used alongside the abundance of metaphor within the pages of scripture – God is a rock, God is water, God is a shepherd, a lioness, a mother hen. Traditional names such as Father, Son or Lord can find their place when they are moderated by the use of a plethora of other names, which together serve as a constant reminder that God is far bigger than any one of them. And we are able to engage in a "conversation" with "the cloud of witnesses" by reading historical texts, in the language of other ages, thus recognising that our faith is not merely of the moment, but has an enduring quality.

The sheer abundance and diversity of images of God in the Bible bears witness to the futility of focusing on any one image as the ultimate exemplification of God. Unfortunately, over the years the church has done just that, by claiming the hetero-white-male-abled-bodied experience to be normative for faith and consequently by naming the deity as male, giving too much agency to strength, aggressiveness and virility.   'There is a better balance to find, that allows for movement and space for diversity of perspective in our use of language, word, metaphor and image.'   (Gail Ramshaw, A Metaphorical God 1995)

So 'expansive language' is used to explore new and respectful language that honours all of God's people. It is more than just gender inclusive. It also seeks to find words, phrases and images that do not offend or reinforce stereotypes harmful to anyone. As our churches celebrate being multicultural and intercultural communities of faith, welcoming forms and styles of worship not historically or traditionally associated with our origins, the conversation about the use of language in our churches becomes more critical, and more challenging. Expansive language gives us freedom to play with language creatively, to encompass grammatical elegance and poetic beauty, to include unedited ancient language that underlines the historicity and enduring quality of faith. It is an invitation to move out of our comfort zones and to be mutually inconvenienced. For if we are a "rainbow people of God" (Desmond Tutu) it follows that our language needs to reflect that diversity!

It is sobering to realise that from the scriptures and over two thousand years of Christian theology, there are so many different names for God such as: helper, Lord, servant and friend; compassionate father, a mother who breastfeeds her children and knits, a tigress, a mother hen, a shepherd, a rock and a tower, a shield and a defense, a landowner, a housekeeper, a baker of bread, a mighty ruler and a powerless infant, the light that enlightens the world, and the darkness that is above all light, the God who is both love and wisdom, and at the same time the God whose name, however close we try to get to it, will always elude us.

General Assembly responded positively to the desire of the Equalities Committee to encourage everyone in the United Reformed Church to think about the language we use in worship, both for ourselves and for God by agreeing the following resolution:

General Assembly affirms the commitment made in 1984 to use inclusive language in all publications. It now seeks to build on that commitment by encouraging all those who lead and participate in worship, all those who train worship leaders, including resource centres for learning, lay preachers conferences, children and youth leaders, local churches and synods, to explore and give intentional consideration to their use of inclusive and expansive language and imagery in worship.