INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE GUIDELINES
FOR
BELLARMINE COMMUNITY *

Introduction

The definition and guidelines that follow deal with the inclusiveness of language used by the church in every area of its life. The churches, including our own, are participating in a discussion about the use of inclusive language. The guidelines that follow are not meant to obviate the importance of that continuing discussion, but rather to furnish some guidelines at the present time, when special sensitivity to the significance and use of language is required. Language is not trivial. It is a vital expression of our beliefs as a community. Our use of language is directly related to our inclusion/exclusion of all people and of a broadening awareness of the mystery of God.

It is important that all of us remember that our basic unity under "one Lord, one faith, one baptism..." far exceeds the issues that would separate us. Those who speak are to take care to be as responsibly inclusive as possible thus showing their care for the feelings of others. Those who hear are to exercise an equal responsibility to listen with love. It is far too easy to accuse one another of being too inclusive or too exclusive rather than trying to listen and speak to each other thoughtfully and with love. The use of language in new ways or the employment of unfamiliar terminology and imagery does not come easily or automatically, but we urge a willingness to explore new possibilities in language even as we implore understanding and sensitivity on the part of all.

Finally, it is good to remember that our efforts towards inclusive language will inevitably involve us in tension between conflicting values which do not yield easy solutions. We must see ourselves in an ever-developing process, striving to express our values amid the complexity and subtlety of language. Yet this effort and consequent tension will only serve to remind us of the Incarnation of God in a human world, the Incarnation of which we are all a part, where all creation groans and waits for a final revelation.

Definitions and Guidelines

A concern for inclusive language bespeaks the church's emerging conviction both that the diversity of the people of God is to be acknowledged and embraced in such a way that all may feel included, as well as the realization that every reference to God is limited in its capacity to express the reality and mystery of the One who has so variously encountered us. For the sake of guidance within the church the following working definitions and guidelines for inclusive language are offered.

* (These pages are an adaptation of "Definitions and Guidelines on Inclusive Language" accepted by the 197th General Assembly (1985), Presbyterian Church—U.S.A. They have been approved by the Inclusive Language Committee of Bellarmine Chapel, June, 1988.)
Definition 1 -- Inclusive language with reference to the people of God:

Language that intentionally seeks to acknowledge the diversity of the membership of the church in such a way that each person may feel included, addressed, and equally valued before God (e.g., "brothers and sisters," rather than "brethren"); "God's children," rather than "sons of God"; "our ancestors" or "our mothers and fathers," rather than simply "our fathers").

Guideline 1.A.

Immediate changes should be made at every level in the life of the church to use inclusive language with respect to the people of God. By seeking to substitute a word such as "humankind," for the previous generic terms "man" or "mankind," as well as by seeking to avoid exclusive dependence on the personal pronoun "he," we testify to the fact that women and men are called by God into service and are equally valued before God and the community of believers. Further, we show responsible sensitivity to the many women and men who are offended when exclusive language is used. This also expresses our fundamental belief in the dignity of all women and men created in the image of God.

Guideline 1.B.

The reading of Scripture in the context of worship is an especially important event for the church. Careful preparation is advised. Decisions to use inclusive language are in order when the lector has been able to discern that the intention of the original text is preserved (e.g., "those of faith" instead of "those who are men of faith"; "no one is justified" instead of "no man is justified"; "therefore, friends" instead of "therefore, brethren"). Whenever possible inclusive language ought to be used provided the intention of the original text is preserved and undue distraction is avoided.

Definition 2 -- Inclusive language with reference to God:

Language which intentionally seeks to express the diverse ways the Bible and our theological tradition speak about God: e.g., one who delivers, champions, and befriends as well as "Savior" and "Lord"; one who acts as guardian, parent, begetter and bearer of children as well as "Creator" and "Heavenly Father"; one who serves as rock, shelter, fortress as well as "the Almighty" or "King."

Guideline 2.A.

Our language about God should be as intentionally diverse and varied as is that of the Bible and our theological tradition. This diversity should be reflected in the language and life of the church. Rather than using only a very small number of terms referring to God (e.g., "Father," "Creator," "Lord," "Almighty"), we should seek to employ the rich reservoir of imagery to be found in the New and Old Testaments. God is appropriately addressed as "Father." Maternal qualities are also ascribed to God in Scripture. Our understanding of the richness of God may be enhanced by using metaphors and similes such as "Rock," "Refuge." Many other terms may also be used legitimately and with great benefit in referring to God. Although maternal qualities are ascribed to God in Scripture, the title "Mother" is not applied to God in the Bible and its use is currently being discussed.
Guideline 2.B

The Trinitarian designation, "Father-Son-Holy Spirit," is an ancient creedal formula and as such should not be altered. It is deeply rooted in our theological tradition, is shared widely by the church catholic, and is basic to many of our ecumenical relationships. It is not theologically acceptable to refer to the persons of the Trinity in terms of function alone (e.g., Shepherd, Helper, Refuge, Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier). The church needs to seek new terms which refer to the being of the persons of the Trinity.

Guideline 2.C.

The personal pronouns "he," "his," and "him" are used with reference to God with great frequency. Biblical usage is often cited in justification though it is clear that the writers of the Bible did not think God was a man. To avoid reinforcing this theologically inappropriate impression, the use of nouns rather than masculine pronouns is preferable (e.g., Creator, Nurturer, Faithful God) and other biblical similes for divine activity, e.g., "nursing the children of Israel like a mother" ought to be highlighted. The interchanging of feminine with masculine pronouns so that it calls attention to itself seems to emphasize gender in a way that may be counterproductive to efforts to develop more inclusive language with respect to God.

Definition 3 -- Exclusive language:

Language which purposely or inadvertently excludes a part of the community of faith (e.g., "brethren," "sons of God," "man") or restricts our perception of God by failure to use the rich testimony of that community's experience of the Holy One.

Guideline 3.A.

Exclusive language should be avoided by the conscientious and affirmative use of inclusive language as indicated above. "To this end the manifold wisdom of God is revealed through the church to all peoples everywhere." (Ephesians 3:10)

Epilogue

The language of worship and theology can be a powerful force in shaping our conceptions and experience of God and of ourselves. Reflection on the power of language is important as we strive to affirm the richly diverse character of God's people and the mystery of the divine presence and self-presentation. Consequently the search for a more adequate language should be done with careful study in thoughtful dialogue with others, with sensitivity to the opinions and feelings of all involved. In this time of exploration and discussion it is important that we not become idolatrous of any particular set of terminology. In the letter to the Galatians Paul sums up the reality of our experience before God and one another with language that is both formative and normative by saying "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Our aim is to glorify God and share joyously the good news of divine grace that has been extended to the whole of creation.