Inclusive Language Guidelines

The first two paragraphs of the Phoenix Community Church Mission Statement say that "All are welcomed at Phoenix, regardless of age, abilities, sex, race, or sexual orientation. We wish to rejoice in our differences while we affirm our similarities."

"At Phoenix, we encourage and celebrate the whole person – mind, body, spirit and imagination. We use new forms of worship that speak to a church community with a variety of beliefs. We attempt to avoid language that is hurtful or exclusive."

One of the ways that we give expression to our mission statement is by using inclusive language in our worship services, meetings, and publications. These guidelines, adopted by the Phoenix church community, provide definitions of what we mean by "inclusiveness" and "inclusive language," our rationale for using inclusive language, and some examples of how words and phrases can be changed to be more inclusive.

1. What is inclusiveness?

Inclusiveness is an attitude or stance of mutuality and openness that respects the dignity of each person and affirms that a church is a community of equals. Inclusiveness does not seek to erase or blur differences between people; it does seek to remove barriers that divide us from each other and to eliminate inequities in power. In this sense, inclusiveness strives to redress injustices and assure that all people can participate equally in decision-making and leadership.

Inclusiveness does not mean that any and all attitudes or behaviors are acceptable in our church community. We do not countenance, for example, attitudes or behaviors that demean the worth of any person or groups of people. Such attitudes and behaviors would not be consistent with an inclusiveness that seeks to honor the dignity of each and every person.

2. What is inclusive language?

Using inclusive language in our speech, songs, and written materials is a means of affirming the dignity and equality of all persons. Inclusive language reflects our intention to overcome barriers and inequities in power between people that are based on age, abilities, sex, race, and sexual orientation.

Exclusive language is one of the means by which certain groups of people have exercised power over others. Exclusive language sanctions the history and experience of some while ignoring or erasing the history and experience of others. If in worship, for example, God is always spoken of in male imagery, men have the opportunity of hearing their lives and experiences mirrored in language for the divine. Women are denied this affirmation when language is exclusively masculine, and their lives and experiences are not treated as equally representative of the divine. If, in worship, members of the congregation are addressed as if all present have the same abilities, our language will imply that some abilities are "normal," while others are "different."

Inclusive language can involve the **substitution** of words, such as "humankind" or "humanity" for "mankind." Inclusive language may mean the **deletion** of certain words that are offensive (if only in context). When reading Scripture aloud, for example, the word "blind" is deleted from "Woe to you Scribes and Pharisees, blind fools." Inclusive language can involve the **addition** of a word; "Brothers

and sisters" replaces "brethren," for example, or "she or he" replaces "he." In all these instances, an attempt needs to be made to retain as much of the original meaning of the text as possible.

The use of inclusive language also involves a sensitivity to the kinds of varieties of illustrations that are used in worship services, meetings, and publications. If sermons, for example, mainly draw on illustrations from the lives of lesbian and gay people, those members of our church who are not lesbian or gay may feel that their life experiences are not being addressed or valued.

3. Why is inclusive language necessary?

It is sometimes argued that inclusive language is necessary because traditional, non-inclusive language upsets and angers some people. If this were the primary motivation for using inclusive language, the same reasoning could support a case against inclusive language, because there are also people who are upset and angry when inclusive language is used. These people feel that they are being denied the opportunity to use terms, names, and images that are meaningful to them.

The need to find and use inclusive language is not motivated by a desire to please a particular group of people. Inclusive language is based on a concern for justice and reconciliation. The concern for justice is, in turn, grounded in the recognition and confession that our language often reflects the biases and inequities of the society in which we live, and serves to inform or strengthen those biases unless corrected.

In a society where racism is still imbedded in institutional practices and personal attitudes, our language can betray a subtle and unconscious conditioning that identifies "white" with "goodness" and "black" with "evil." Likewise, in a society where sexism is still pervasive, language can perpetuate the assumption that man is primary and woman is secondary. A man is a male being and a woman is a female being, but in common usage "man" has also been used to refer generally to "human being." The word "woman," however, is never used as a term for "human being." "Man," then, is used as a synonym for "human being" while "woman" becomes a subgroup under "human."

If all things were truly equal and there were not centuries of sexism behind us, then it would not be necessary to refrain from speaking of God as "Father" or to balance the image of "Father" with the image of "Mother." But all things are not yet equal, and at Phoenix we seek to demonstrate an awareness of how traditional language for both God and human beings has tended to be exclusively male for centuries.

The concern for inclusive **theological** language at Phoenix centers around more than sexism. We want our language to reflect our conviction that God is not distant, punitive, oppressive, or controlling. We reject the assumption found in some theologies that claims that the further removed we get from our bodies, our sexuality, our humanity, and the earth, the closer we get to God. We seek to find and use images for God that portray the divine-human relationship as liberating and empowering – images such as Holy One, Spirit, shalom of our being, shelter for the homeless, mother <u>and</u> father, lover, friend, and liberator of the oppressed. The discipline of using inclusive language reminds us that **all** of our language for God is metaphorical. That which we experience as holy has many names. No one name or even many names can capture or definitively name the One who is always surprising us by bursting the boundaries of human language and human custom.

At Phoenix, we have found that the attempt to re-image God in inclusive language can be an exciting and instructive challenge. Such a re-imaging encourages each of us to delve deeply and ask: How and

where do I experience the Spirit? How can I describe that experience in my own words as well as in the words that tradition has given me? This search can turn up treasures that can enrich and expand our spiritual understanding as we share them with each other.

4. Ways that inclusive language is used at Phoenix.

As we strive to be inclusive in our language, there are different ways to reflect this intention. Those who help to plan and lead worship have a special responsibility to avoid language that is exclusive. Our common worship activities, such as litanies, songs, and unison prayers, ought to use inclusive language and images. The pastors, the choir, and those who share music and other gifts for worship have the responsibility of helping to create an inclusive atmosphere. During the Prayer of the People, individual members of the congregation are invited to use whatever names or images of God that are most meaningful to them. Some may address God as "Father" while others may speak of "the Goddess."

Using inclusive language is both a conscious discipline and a learning experience. We are making discoveries along the way, and therefore these guidelines are not definitive. They will be amended as we change and grow. In a sense, we are trying to find a balance - recognizing the history of social injustice while also respecting the needs and beliefs of individual people. On the one hand, we want to avoid male language for God because it has been the dominant language for centuries. On the other hand, we recognize that the members of our congregation must be able to say "God-he" just as much as they are able to say "God-she."

If we are to learn more inclusive ways of speaking, we will need to make a conscious effort to be inclusive and be willing to stand corrected when we fail. When correction is called for, we can offer it in a spirit that builds community and acknowledges that none of us have arrived at a place of total inclusiveness.

5. Examples of inclusive alternatives.

Scripture readings

RSV: "Let your light so shine before <u>men</u>" (Matthew 5:16)
ALTERNATIVE: "Let your light so shine before <u>others"</u>

RSV: "Jesus said to them, 'I am the bread of life; <u>he</u> who comes to me shall not hunger…" (John 6:35.37)
ALTERNATIVE: "Jesus said to them, 'I am the bread of life; <u>those</u> who come to me shall not hunger…"

"Brethren" or "brothers" can be rendered "sisters and brothers,," "neighbor," or "friends."

The phrase "kingdom of God" can be rendered in various ways:
"Commonwealth of god," "realm of god," "new order of the Spirit," or "new age."

Where appropriate, additions to the text can be made. For example, "the God of Abraham" can be changed to "the God of Abraham and Sarah."

"The Son of Man" can be rendered "the Human One"

Names and images for God:

"Father" can be rendered "Parent" or "Father and Mother." When a passage is read in which "Father" appears more than once, the reader can alternate, using both "Father" and "Mother."

"Lord"
According to Hebrew tradition, the personal name for God, "Yahweh," was not to be pronounced for fear it would be profaned. Therefore, a title of reverence was substituted – "adonai" – which has been translated as "my Lord."
Some people prefer "Lord" or "Lord God" to "God" because these names seem more reverent. This sense of reverence can be retained while substituting other names for "Lord" such as "Holy One," or "Creator God."

"He," "His," "Him."
There are various options when confronted with masculine pronouns for God:

1. Avoid the use of pronouns by substituting the world "God" (or other names) for "he." By using a variety of names, you avoid using "God" so often that the name becomes banal by repetition.
EXAMPLE: "in his hand are the depths of the earth, and the mountains peaks belong to him." (Psalm 95:4&5)
ALTERNATIVE: "in the Creator's hand are the depths of the earth, and the mountain peaks belong to God."

2. Avoid pronouns by using words such as "who," "whose," and "God-self."
EXAMPLE: "Praise God for his mercy endures forever."
ALTERNATIVE: "Praise God whose mercy endures forever."
    "Himself" can be changed to "Gods-self."

3. Alternate male pronouns with female pronouns. EXAMPLE: "Praise God for his mercy endures forever and his love extends to all generations." ALTERNATIVE: "Praise God for her mercy endures forever and his love extends to all generations."

4. Substitute second person pronouns for third person pronouns. EXAMPLE: "Great is the Lord, for he created heaven and earth." ALTERNATIVE: "Great are you, O God, for you created heaven and earth."

Changing the lyrics of songs that we sing in worship can be a challenge for several reasons. Understandably, some people feel uncomfortable tampering with the artistic creation of another person. Sometimes the rhyme is lost by substituting another word, and avoiding pronouns can feel distancing.

In most cases the songs we sing together as a congregation are drawn from inclusive language songbooks that have obtained permission to change the lyrics. While acknowledging that changes may not always be aesthetically pleasing, we feel that the need to be inclusive outweighs any aesthetic concerns.