*In 1979 a committee of faculty and students of Vanderbilt Divinity School and the Graduate Department of Religion, called by the Dean and supported by a resolution of the VDS faculty at large, drafted a document on inclusive language that was revised in 1987 and again in 1999. Like its predecessors, this version (updated in 2024) serves as an introduction to those new to the issue and as a preliminary resource for those seeking alternatives for exclusive terms. Students are encouraged to seek out additional resources from VDS/GDR faculty and staff.*

*The original document focused on sexism in language, but sexism is not the only problem that must be addressed. Language reflecting exclusion and contempt towards persons and groups based on such factors as race, ethnicity, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, sex characteristics, disability, age, and national origin require attention and reformation. This document has been updated to reflect current understandings of gender, sexuality, and, to some extent, disability. More remains to be done, of course, as the faculty has commissioned a task force on this topic in 24-25.*

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# Guidelines on Expansive & Inclusive Language

**Vanderbilt Divinity School**

We at VDS believe it is important to approach language with respect and integrity. We believe expansive and inclusive language is both a gift and an imperative, based on several convictions:

1. Language shapes and reflects the world we experience;
2. Language reflects the reality of diversity among groups of people;
3. Language should respect and affirm the full personhood of each individual;
4. Language is one way in which leaders and scholars may spark sacred imagination, open metaphorical possibilities, and communicate values;
5. Responsibility for the values conveyed through language and for the usage of

appropriate language is not just an individual matter, but of concern for the entire VDS/GDR community as this institution seeks to live into the [Purposes and Commitments](https://divinity.vanderbilt.edu/about/purposes/) more fully.

This document is intended to encourage our community to cultivate the habit of speaking and writing inclusively. It offers a brief overview of inclusive language from a (primarily Christian) theological perspective. The more expansive and inclusive approach to language summarized briefly below is designed to offer an important corrective to language that may intentionally or unintentionally demean and exclude, as well as provide a positive and inclusive approach that acknowledges our evolving understanding of the sacred worth of all people. Achieving this goal requires attention to the following primary areas of concern:

1. **References to People**

Community members should pay attention to the bias behind pronouns, nouns, idioms, and axioms used unwittingly from religious and/or cultural traditions to refer to the name, titles, and roles people occupy in life. Gendered nouns, (e.g., “mankind,” “brotherhood”) can be replaced easily by inclusive terminology, (e.g., “humankind,” “community,” “household”). This includes using “siblings” along with “brothers and sisters” or “spouses” alongside “husband and wife” to signal inclusion of non-binary people. This is not to say we cannot be specific; rather this is an invitation to use language that does not erase people, particularly those who face marginalization. Using “neurodiverse people” rather than “people with intellectual disabilities” acknowledges the enhanced capacities that, for example, people with autism bring to the world that “neurotypical” people do not possess. Members of the community are encouraged to remain appropriately curious, asking rather than assuming pronouns or titles or roles, and making time to learn pronouns and inclusive terminology for people. References to people continue to shift and change; rather than memorizing a list of current terminology, we encourage the community to be open to shifting religious, cultural, liturgical, and academic norms.

1. **References to the Divine**

As the late Sallie McFague, Carpenter Professor Emerita and former Dean of VDS, famously argued, religious language is metaphorical.[[1]](#endnote-1) While many find comfort and significance in them, masculine titles, pronouns, and imagery for G-d[[2]](#endnote-2) have served in the Christian tradition as a cornerstone for what New Testament scholar Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza has dubbed “kyriarchy,” the intersecting systems of domination – including but not limited to patriarchy – of some over others.[[3]](#endnote-3) Like many other religious traditions, Christian scriptural and historical traditions offer expansive metaphors that refer to the divine in diverse and creative ways. Some Christian metaphors for G-d imply no gender at all (e.g., friend, creator, redeemer, sustainer). Using a variety of metaphors opens up new ways to experience the divine and deepen the devotional experience. Exploration of fresh language for G-d requires a serious effort to comprehend our personal experiences and understandings of G-d and a respect for the diversity of the practices of different worshiping communities. It is vital to maintain sensitivity to the preferences and expertise of practitioners. We seek to introduce additional language – particularly language that reflects the diversity of imagery in biblical and theological traditions – rather than to erase language currently in use.

1. **Interpretation of Scripture**

Bible translations such as the Inclusive Language Bible, the Common English Bible, or the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition have attempted to address the problems of exclusive language and incorrect translation in a variety of ways with varying degrees of success. Beyond the work of revision committees, all persons who read scripture share the responsibility of interpretation. Some expressions do not appear in the original Hebrew or Greek texts and, when added, necessarily distort the original text. Other references reflect historical situations of an ancient worldview and present greater difficulty in appropriate translation.

Translations that respect human diversity and divine mystery rest on several assumptions: religious faith rests on a diversity of images of God, some of which are gendered and some of which are not; (b) translation is an ongoing process, and the authority of the text does not rest on the actual words of the text; (c) many regard some texts as revelatory and some texts as counter-revelatory; and (d) careful attention and due responsibility are necessary to counteract oppressive and destructive use of particular texts.

1. **Liturgy and Hymnody**

On the one hand, using expansive language for the sacred and inclusive language for people in liturgies and hymns seems relatively simple, particularly in those traditions that have flexible liturgies. For many Christians, creeds, confessions, the Lord's Prayer, sermons, and hymns are deeply revered. Fortunately, new hymns and new hymnals have appeared over the past decades, including “Songs for the Holy Other,” a publication of the Hymn Society in the United States and Canada, of hymns affirming the LGBTQIA+ community. Some ministers now attempt to use a wider diversity of examples and gender references in sermons and prayers. Change in creeds and confessions has progressed more slowly.

Our attentiveness to religious and liturgical language touches on deeper matters related to theological understandings of key religious doctrines, traditions, and practices. In the past several decades, extensive research and publication related to questions of inclusivity have occurred not only in the area of language and worship, but also in several areas of religious studies. In writing or utilizing liturgy, we encourage our community to commit to educating ourselves and one another on the roles language plays not only in power arrangements, but in sparking imagination, and evoking mystery. Addressing inadequate and destructive language and expanding the range of possible terms and images is, after all, only the surface of broader ideological and structural transformations necessary to achieve genuine respect for and affirmation of diversity and of the divine.

1. Sallie McFague, Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1982). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. We use “G-d” rather than “God” to respect the biblical admonishment particularly central to Judaism that the name of G-d is not to be spoken. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1992). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)