

**Balancing Male and Female Images of God in  
Christian Liturgy:  
Should We Have This as a Goal?**

**by Kathryn Piccard**

## Defining the Problems and Solutions

When Christians recognize sexism in our worship services and see this as a problem, how we define the problem will directly affect the solutions we can easily identify. In the 1970s many Christian feminists saw the generic use of male words and phrases, such as “all men,” as inherently sexist, and called for the elimination of this venerable custom of generic usage. Based on socio-linguistic research published at the time it is clear that they were correct: a substantial portion of the population unconsciously understood the words in an exclusive fashion, and possibly many had the conscious awareness of them as exclusive, too. The words functioned exclusively and it was inaccurate to claim otherwise. These words did interfere with worship, and contravened the stated purposes of worship. I am in full agreement with how that problem was defined and what solution was sought.

Also in the early 1970s some denominations already had ordained women, some began to ordain women after 1970, and some still do not ordain women and their hierarchies do not plan to ordain women. Often apart from ordination, many denominations have gradually increased the leadership of lay women in liturgy since 1970, from choir members to readers. In the 1970s feminists in denominations which did not yet ordain women began to work for the ordination of women and the employment of ordained women. Among myriad motivations, some of them identified a hope that this would help achieve a reduction in liturgical sexism in several ways, from sermon content to the words of hymns and other texts.

Also in the early 1970s many Christian feminists defined a major problem in worship services as “male words for God,” and saw the solution as “eliminating male words for God from worship services,” and some local congregations around the United States and in Canada tried to do this.<sup>1</sup> While this was an improvement welcomed by some, it had three major problems:

1. the vast majority of texts in the Bible, in hymnals, and in other worship materials, used male language, so revisions took a long time and involved copyright issues and publication expenses;<sup>2</sup>
2. many people loved old texts and ridiculed changes and the very idea of change, and felt the very idea must be heretical, since Jesus taught the *Our Father*, and the Bible had so many male words for God, and since Matthew 28:19 used male language for the baptismal formula; and
3. the male images were imprinted on people’s imaginations, and were there even when male words were not used. (In this case I believe that the original problem largely remained, though it had become more subtle. The problem was internal to the worshippers, and no longer external for the community to see as easily.)

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<sup>1</sup> This could well be to be the kind of attempted “radical excision” mentioned by Bynum in the first quotation from her work, below.

<sup>2</sup> *The New Century Hymnal*, published by the United Church of Christ, is one example and it has a great many hymns that were revised to avoid male wording for God. It also has some hymns with male and female wording for God.

It should be noted that I have never encountered any Christian, or the writings of any Christian, who showed the slightest interest in denying that Jesus was male, though many did wish to de-emphasize that fact in the language of worship. By male images of God I mean the images formed in the imagination of Christians by the use of male words like *Father, he, him, his*, etc. I do not mean masculine imagery, based on stereotypes, such as warrior language. Similarly, female images of God are formed by the use of words such as *Mother, she, her, hers*, etc., and are distinct from feminine stereotypes such as nurturing and mercy.

Another approach to the problem of sexism in the language of worship is to define the problem differently, and instead of identifying the problem as “male words for God,” to say that the problem is “an *imbalance* in the use of male and female imagery and wording for God,” a relative overabundance of male images, and a dearth of female images of God, and the resulting imbalance or limitation in the imagination and understanding of the worshipper (compounded by sex role stereotypes). When the problem is looked at this way, *different* solutions emerge, solutions involving the following components:

1. Education (for all ages in the congregation) about the female images of God in the Bible and in the writings of Christians through the centuries, including education in the workings of symbols, metaphor and imagery, and of the inadequacy of all images and symbols to represent God.
2. An increase in the composition and use of hymns and other texts with female images of God, until a balance in the pattern of female and male images is achieved.
3. A decrease in the use of hymns and other texts with male images of God, until a balance in the pattern of male and female images is achieved.
4. Continued use of images of God which are not sex-specific, such as images of God as vine, light, brook, verb, wind, rock, etc.
5. Education about sex role stereotypes.
6. Monitoring of worship texts (and patterns of texts) to avoid sex role stereotypes, both in reference to people and to divine images, including attention to Bible stories and other references in worship and Christian education, to men and women.<sup>3</sup>
7. Better Bible translations, made with an awareness of socio-linguistic gender issues in translation of *linguistic* gender.

## **The idea of balance**

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<sup>3</sup> Crist, Miriam, and Tilda Norberg, “Sex Role Stereotyping in the United Methodist Nursery Curriculum,” 1970, appendix I, pp. 119-124 in Sarah Bentley Doely, ed., *Women’s Liberation and the Church: the New Demand for Freedom in the Life of the Christian Church*, NY: Association Press, 1970, offers this summary about its findings of extensive sex role stereotypes: “The Study revealed blatant sexual stereotyping of behavior, emotions, abilities, occupations and life style on almost every page. Men and boys were generally shown as active, brave, useful, shaping their environment, and happy in their world. Women and girls were portrayed as passive, powerless, waiting, needing help, watching the action, and often unhappy.” Parental roles and adult jobs were similarly stereotyped. Stereotypes are cultural constructs which can be modified over time, which may differ in different social classes, which differ from one culture to another, and differ between a dominant culture and various sub-cultures.

Balancing a congregation's long term pattern of sex-specific images of God in liturgy is a good idea for several reasons, whether those images are twenty percent of the divine images in a liturgy or eighty-five percent of the divine images in a liturgy. Of course, I am assuming that the balance is devoid of sex role stereotypes, and it is done not only for all the images of "God," but also of the images of each *Persona* of the Holy Trinity. I believe it is desirable because it is a matter of telling more of God's truth, so the proclamation of the Gospel can be more effective, both for those inside the Church now, to educate and retain them as faithful Christians, and for those outside now, to attract and educate them, to make and keep them faithful Christians. Also, it should be mentioned that it has real potential to bring a healing dimension to pastoral care, as will be discussed below. It can help us understand ourselves better as males and females made in God's image, although, by itself, it is no guarantee that we will treat ourselves or each other better. It can help us see aspects of biblical and historic Christian literature that have been overlooked.

I have been involved in conversations about having a balance of female and male images of God in Christian liturgy since as long ago as 1976. This idea of **balance** shows up as a basic structural element of Luke's Gospel, and may well go back to Jesus himself not just in terms of his repertoire of parables, but perhaps even to his preaching style. The simplest way to put it is that in Luke's Gospel, time after time after time, at least twenty times, stories or parables of men are linked to those of women. Did Jesus just have a generally balanced repertoire of stories that Luke decided (maybe under the Spirit's inspiration) to present by alternating male and female examples? Or did Jesus link female and male stories in his teaching, with a balanced, alternating style which other Gospel writers (or their sources) failed to notice and/or failed to maintain, perhaps thinking it was unimportant? In any case, its presence in Luke looks like divine inspiration to some.

The crude but simple method of approximating a balance of male and female images of God in liturgy, or at least in liturgical texts, is to tabulate the number of female and male words for God and for people used in each service, and to plan to use more of one type whenever the tabulations have gotten out of balance.<sup>4</sup> Other modes than language which can be balanced include the people in up front leadership positions (clergy, choir, readers, assistants, music minister) and the art (banners, statues, stained glass, icons, projected slides), insofar as it depicts people and/or God. It is not necessary to have a perfect balance in each service, if the overall pattern of liturgy is balanced. However, I believe that more of an effort should be made to balance liturgies when there are special services with guests who do not attend regularly, because it will give them a more accurate idea of the Gospel, which some of them may not understand, and a more accurate impression of this particular congregation.

## **Preparation for Goal Setting**

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<sup>4</sup> In order to do this it will help to have data sheets for reference. Examples will be included in Making the Daily Offices Less Sexist, forthcoming, which will be posted at [www.katrinasmidream.org](http://www.katrinasmidream.org) under **Just Words?**

Having a balance of female and male images of God in worship services, without sex role stereotypes, and having it for each *Persona* of the Trinity, is an ambitious goal, but not only are most congregations not ready to *meet* this goal,<sup>5</sup> they are not even ready to *set* it as a goal! It might be the goal of a worship committee or of the music director or of the clergy, or of two or three lay people gathered together, but not of the entire congregation. Typically only a few people at a time are interested and motivated to work on this, perhaps because those who have previously been motivated may have disengaged from liturgy due to intransigent sexism.<sup>6</sup> In such a situation I think the best thing to do is to **first make the possibility of this goal a consistent object of both private and corporate prayer.** Later it can become a focus of education and of trial use of worship texts. Lamentation about imbalance in sex-specific divine imagery in liturgy may be necessary in the meantime in private prayer and the subject may warrant mention in liturgical prayer. Because this goal will make a significant difference in the life of a congregation it is important that the congregation have informed consent to the goal. It should not be tricked, manipulated or coerced into setting a goal of balance, but should corporately own the goal, and have a real commitment to it.

In the Episcopal Church at most worship services we invite prayer on a series of topics, where people may speak their concerns aloud if they wish. For example, “Thank you for giving us such a wealth of different images of You in the Bible.” Or, “Thank you, O God, that the parish worship committee is willing to study some of the newer material authorized by General Convention, to see which material will help us here in our worship of you.” “Help those of us who are distracted by sexism in the prayer book language to find effective ways to worship you liturgically.” Or, “Help us in the adult education committee find the right resources to study Bible images of You.” Or, “We ask your help as our parish considers how to reduce liturgical sexism in a way that remains faithful to you.” Or, “We ask for your wisdom this week as we conduct an evaluation of our project of reducing liturgical sexism. Help us be sensitive to your Spirit’s guidance.” Or, “We thank you for the gifts of music in our choir as it teaches us new ways to praise you. Help us each find ways that are heartfelt.” While the corporate intercessions should be authentic, they also should not be manipulative of the congregation or of the feelings of those present.

Planning is important because of how it affects people. It can build accountability and hope and trust, and help people demonstrate respect for each other’s feelings, experience and knowledge. Plans ordinarily need to include biblical, theological and liturgical education, discussions, prayer, goal setting, identification of multiple choices or options, decision making with a time table including evaluations, trial and error, more evaluations,

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<sup>5</sup> Most congregations do not have the practical resources, such as hymns and other texts, to meet this goal, and are not sure where to find them. Many do not yet exist, while others are hard to find.

<sup>6</sup> Women have said that the experience of dealing with sexist liturgical texts is parallel to the experience of the cycle of domestic violence: it is a spiritual violation leading to withdrawal, denial, the re-emergence of hope, gradual return to liturgy and exposure to risk, and eventual re-offense. Also, some may have disengaged in part because of a lack of available resources to use in pressing for progress toward this goal. If you can identify people who may have disengaged from worship because of the depth of sexism, try inviting them back. Knowing that they are needed may make a difference.

reporting, and revisions of goals and timetable, and respect for people's varied feelings. Changes as important as ones around liturgical sexism require significant education and reflection for most people in the congregation. This is because hearing people think with words most of the time, and deciding what words to use in worship is tantamount to telling people how to think (in their relationship to God.) and how to talk to each other about God, and how to talk to God. Furthermore, a number of people suspect that a plan to reduce the number of male images of God is (or involves) a criticism of males, men, or male images of God, familiar images which have usually mediated God's love and grace to them. Both of these things, telling people how to think, and communicating that there is something wrong with men, and with the male images of God which have mediated God's love and grace to us, must not only be avoided, but need to be directly addressed. Some of the following points do this.

Part of respecting the dignity of each person, part of how the members of the congregation can show pastoral sensitivity to each other, is to listen to people's ideas and feelings with respect, though this is harder when one's own ideas and feelings differ. I think that the whole congregation should have an opportunity to be involved in education and in having their say. I find it helps to tell people several things:

1. This is not about getting rid of male images of God. I do not believe that male images of God are inherently sexist. I believe that they are god-given and valuable, and that we need to retain them and use them in worship services. Also, we need to use them thoughtfully, when they have something to say, not just haphazardly on autopilot. This will strengthen them. (The same is true for female images of God.)
2. We should not be telling anyone how they should feel about certain images of God, or certain hymns or prayers or words, what they should like or dislike, or what they should do in their private prayers. Everyone is entitled to their feelings, which nobody can control anyway, and no feelings are wrong to feel. Also everyone is responsible for cherishing the imagery God uses to reach them individually.
3. We should encourage each other to try to respect each other's feelings, and not try to tell others how to feel or how to pray in private. Again, no feelings are wrong to feel.
4. Our patterns of worship are imbalanced because we overuse male images of God and under-use female images of God. Although both are in the Bible, we do not use them in a balanced way.<sup>7</sup> So our imbalanced pattern is functionally sexist, like a teeter-totter with one side way up and the other way down, even though neither male nor female images of God are inherently sexist. It is not that every service must have exactly the same number of male words for God as female words for God, but that the overall pattern should be balanced through time.
5. Though I believe that our private prayer is between us and God, I also believe that what the Church does publicly in its worship services is not determined just by what we may like or feel comfortable with, but also by what effect it may have on others and what it may teach about God. The needs to be considered include needs of those interested in change, the needs of those opposed to change, the needs of those who don't care or aren't

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<sup>7</sup> The Bible does not use them in a balanced way, either. See below under Discussion Questions, 2. However, it should be noted that a great many of the male words for God in the English Bible are artifacts of translation, representing interpretive decisions, and are not required translation decisions, especially in the Hebrew Bible.

sure, perhaps the needs of those who have left the Church in dismay, the needs of those not yet evangelized, and the need to reflect (at least) the breadth of biblical revelation about God.

## **Education and evangelism**

The necessary education on relevant topics should include all age groups, and while some of it should take place during worship services, some other educational activities need to take place outside of worship services where people can feel comfortable raising questions and expressing disagreements with each other and with resource material. Instead of telling people what images they should or shouldn't like, this project of shifting patterns of imagery usage by adding some or many female images of God is a matter of telling more of God's truth. In some cases only a few months might be needed for education, but in other cases a longer period will be necessary, possibly even a few years.

Sometimes it is desirable to have a skilled outsider come into a parish to make presentations about some of the history, Bible, theology, issues and resources, rather than having the local clergy or anybody else local be the point person for what may be seen as disturbing innovation, especially in the early stages. This leaves the local clergy free to serve as pastors for those who are upset or threatened, if anyone is. Anybody who wants to "shoot the messenger" still has somebody they can go to who can be sympathetic, somebody to whom they can open up. If the priest has been presenting material about female images of God in the Bible, they may be afraid to tell the priest how upset or angry they feel, or the priest might respond defensively. But if a guest speaker has presented the material, they may be able to go to the priest and complain, or raise questions, and the priest may be able to listen and help.

How many Christians who identify themselves as "born again" have stopped to think that, according to John 3:5, Somebody is their Mother, and it is God the Holy Spirit? Educational work might well examine female images of God in the Bible, because many Christians find it reassuring to know that both **biblical precedent and authority** exist for the use of female images of God, and that this includes female imagery for each *Persona* of the Trinity.<sup>8</sup> Several councils of the Church, including ecumenical councils, used female images of God, setting **historic conciliar precedent**. Anglo-Catholics (Episcopalians) and Roman Catholics might be interested in the fact that all thirty-three doctors of the Church each used female images of God in their writing, setting a **saintly doctoral precedent, including papal precedent**. Episcopalians may be interested in Dame Julian of Norwich, who is celebrated on their calendar of lesser feasts on May 8<sup>th</sup>,

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<sup>8</sup> Most of the female images of God in the Hebrew Bible can be understood by Trinitarian Christians as images of the One God, the Holy Trinity. Deuteronomy 32:18 is an example. Jesus gives us an explicit female image of himself in Luke 13:34 and Mt. 23:37, and an implicit female image of the Holy Spirit in John 3:5. 1 Peter 1:3 has an explicit paternal image of the First *Persona* and an implicit maternal image of the First *Persona*. The Apocrypha also has a couple female images of God.

who used female images of God extensively in her writing. Eastern Orthodox Christians may be interested in learning about the number of Eastern Orthodox writers in every century who have similarly used female images of God in their writings, including using some in liturgical texts. Many Protestant writers have also used female divine imagery. There are several books that are suitable for pre-readers and early readers in the Christian educational program,<sup>9</sup> and there are exercises for Sunday School students.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to prayer, those motivated to see change should educate themselves to an extent, probably ahead of the rest of the congregation when possible, and at some point they should explicitly *ask* for changes, maybe repeatedly, like the persistent widow, because those with the power to schedule educational programs in the parish and to introduce liturgical change—or even to call new clergy—are not mind readers. Whether they act through informal means or through the formality of a resolution at the annual parish meeting will depend on their evaluation of the local situation. The vestry (local governing board), the clergy, the music director, and the educational director are critical people to have involved in education and planning. It can also be quite helpful to have Church School teachers on board, so teaching them about female images of God in the Bible may be a priority, so that they can teach parents and children. The book by Mollenkott, listed in the bibliography, which is also available in a few other languages, may be especially useful, despite its unwarranted equation of the concepts female and feminine. It can be used by high school students and adults.

Many, perhaps most, congregations might need several months or even years of education and trial use of liturgical texts before the distracting novelty wears off enough for members to make tolerant evaluations of the desirability of a goal, and of the quality of different texts, or even of judging the desirability of moving toward such a goal. If a parish is going to make improvements in the next five years, for example, in the number of hymns, prayers, readings and sermon illustrations it uses with female images of God, it might want to examine how many it is using now as a baseline. Similarly, it might look at the wording of the Bible translation it uses. Some parishes might only be comfortable with one fifth as many female images of God as male images of God, or half as many, and might not want to go any farther, just as some parishes are only comfortable with one third of the vestry or parish council being women or being members of minority groups. Why is *that* proportion the discomfort point? For *whom* is it the discomfort point? When, if ever, should the point of discomfort be accepted as a limit rather than a growth point?

Even young children understand the concept of fairness, and can be heard to protest various things with the accusation or claim, “That’s not fair!” to each other and to adults.

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<sup>9</sup> These three children’s books are terrific for a godchild or a Church School library. The first two are more simple. *Old Turtle* by Douglas Wood and Cheng-Khee Chee. Duluth, MN: Pfeifer-Hamilton, 1992. *In God’s Name* by Sandy Eisenberg Sasso. Woonsocket, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1994. *Heart Talks With Mother God* by Bridget Mary Meehan and Regina Madonna Oliver. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995. This book is biblical and specifically Christian.

<sup>10</sup> Early readers may delight in learning how to look up Bible passages with a variety of images of God, including male and female images, as they study “What is God Like?” They may also like to illustrate their findings. Those already involved in Christian education will probably have great ideas for how to work with parishioners who are children, such as writing prayers.



“She got the bigger half!” or “How come I have to eat more broccoli than *he* does?” and similar complaints of outrage are familiar to parents and teachers. By middle school children should come to understand the relationship of fairness to the recurrent biblical concepts and vocabulary of justice and oppression. But applying the idea of balancing male and female images of God to Christian liturgy, while it sounds fair, runs right up against the fact that many Christians think that female images of God are un-Christian and that such female images would or might constitute changing the Bible and changing the teaching of Jesus, and thus might be or would be a betrayal of Jesus and an abandonment of the Christian faith. That is understandably deeply threatening. So their legitimate concerns about the faith entrusted to them<sup>11</sup> need to be addressed before a congregation formally decides whether or not to set such a goal around balance imagery in worship.

A related matter is learning that the use of female images of God is not the recent invention of Christian feminists, nor is it a moribund artifact found only in the Bible, or the work of the third and fourth Ecumenical Councils, or only in the earliest centuries of the Church, a practice which has died out, or which hibernated for centuries and which is being proposed for resuscitation after due deliberation. Instead it is not only a long lasting tradition, but it is an ongoing, *living tradition*, presumably because consciously or unconsciously it draws on Scriptural imagery, it draws on observations of the Creator’s work in the natural world and the social world and thus on lived human experience, and I daresay it is inspired by the living God. While it is only a minor aspect of tradition, or a thread in the tapestry of tradition, it has been persistent feature of the tradition, present in every century of the life of the Church., east and west.

A few of the historic Christian writings which used female divine images through the centuries were originally written for liturgical use, such as sermons, prayers and hymns, and a few have been adapted for liturgical use. But because so many of those selections reinforce (sexist) sex role stereotypes, they are not necessarily readily usable liturgically. The other, and related, reason for caution with these selections is the “halo effect” which can be especially powerful for children, the implicit uncritical (and not necessarily conscious) idea that “if it happens in Church it must have God’s approval.” Furthermore, material which utilizes sex role stereotypes impedes evangelism, because it conveys a distorted version of the Gospel without its full liberating potential, whether the hearers welcome familiar role stereotypes or not. **In their particular context, responsible liturgists must always be as sure as possible that the subtle and/or implicit features of liturgy do not counteract or contradict the Gospel message.** As a result, anyone wanting to look to the doctors or other historic Christian writers for material for liturgical use might best utilize their *precedent* of using female images of God, rather than the *particular* heavily maternal and otherwise stereotyped selections they wrote in most cases.<sup>12</sup> The halo effect of exclusively male imagery—suggesting that God is more male-

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<sup>11</sup> They want to guard the deposit of faith; 2 Timothy 1:13-14.

<sup>12</sup> The heavy emphasis, for example, on images of mothers of little children in the writings of the doctors contrasts with the male imagery used by the doctors, who, like the biblical writers, had a variety of male images of God, not just paternal images, and their paternal imagery was not just of fathers of little children. The images of Jesus and the Father, for example, are mostly images of the adult Jesus and the Father.

like than female-like—is one of the important reasons why we *need* female images of God in abundance in our liturgical language, to the extent of needing a balance.

Part of education is actually using female images of God in worship, seeing how that feels and noticing what they actually say about God. In the Episcopal Church an easy way to do this is to use one or more of the 21 or so of the authorized hymns which have explicit female images of God. Some people will trust that these hymns are theologically acceptable because they have the denominational stamp of approval.<sup>13</sup> The choir might use anthems based on hymns, or some of those hymns as anthems, as a way to familiarize the congregation with hymns it will learn later.

In 1982 I compiled *The Non-Sexist Hymn Concert Handbook* so that those using it with either the *Episcopal Hymnal 1940* or later with the *Episcopal Hymnal 1982* could sing several hymns with male images of God, several hymns with female images of God, several hymns with both, and several hymns with neither. This has proven to be a useful educational concept, which is transferable to other denominations. It demonstrates that often familiar hymns use varied metaphors for God, and that hymns which include female imagery for God can be usable in Christian worship, and singing the hymns conveys this more effectively than merely reading them does.

### **Next Steps: Planning Goals and Timetables**

Action plans are locally decided, and they work within the realm of choice, or local control. Denominations and congregations can, if they wish, make action plans, **setting goals and timetables for prayer and education and later especially for trial use** for all ages, and, if they wish, for moving in the direction of balance, even if they have not yet set balance as a goal. This allows progress—or regress—to be measured and projected. Some denominations are very restrictive in how much of the liturgy they allow the local congregation to plan or choose between options or alternatives, while other denominations let the local congregation have total control of all the words in the service. Even denominations which pre-determine most of the local liturgy typically allow a choice between different Bible translations, perhaps a choice of hymns, and some other choices, which can be used judiciously to decrease sexism and move in the direction of balance.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> For instance, you might try 513 from *The Hymnal 1982: according to the use of the Episcopal Church*, NY: Church Hymnal Corp., c. 1985; and 80 from Horace Clarence Boyer, general editor, *Lift Every Voice And Sing II: an African American Hymnal*, NY: Church Publishing, c. 1993, a nineteenth century hymn; 105 and 106 in Episcopal Church, *Voices Found: [women in the Church's Song]*, NY: Church Publishing, 2003; and 110, 141, and 142 for children in Fiona Vidal-White, Fiona, compiler and editor, *My Heart Sings Out*. NY: Church Publishing, 2005. While each of the 21 is acceptable in isolation, their overall heavily maternal imbalanced *pattern* is just as much a problem as is the heavily male imbalance of all the Episcopal hymnals.

<sup>14</sup> I recognize that although most Christians are unaware of it, there are already actually a few liturgical texts with female images of God in use in all or virtually all denominations, and these are not just baptismal services with their statements that “We must be born again by water and the Holy Spirit!” Furthermore,

In a denomination like the Episcopal Church, although there are hymnals and a *Book of Common Prayer* that are basically required, there are still literally hundreds, if not thousands, of possible choices for each service. Being aware of options for changing the imbalance of female and male images of God means deciding things like whether to begin by working with Sunday services or weekday services, with hymns or sermon illustrations, with Rite I or Rite II services, with many things at once or only a few at a time. What about Bible translations, dropping hymns with inherently sexist language,<sup>15</sup> trying recently authorized hymns and canticles, etc.? Other denominations will face their own sets of choices. How often should changes be evaluated? Who should decide all these matters? There may be denominational rules, or congregational rules, and if so, they should be explained to the whole congregation. For example, in the Episcopal Church the vestry can hold educational programs for all ages and approve purchases of educational resources, but only the rector or priest in charge has the power under canon law to make the liturgical decisions, and others are only in an advisory role. Often with matters like these the rector will ask for a vote on various matters, to get the “mind” of the parish.

### **Discussion Questions for use in education and planning**

1. If we continue to move at this rate, when will we have achieved balance? Should we change our rate of change? Does anyone need to be protected from change occurring at too fast a rate? Why? (I'd like to be protected from procrastinators! I am reminded of reading in a Lambeth Conference report that “The New Testament does not encourage Christians to think that nothing should be done for the first time.”<sup>16</sup>) Do children, teenagers, or others need to be protected from change proceeding too slowly?
2. Does the greater frequency of male images of God than female images of God in the Bible and tradition have significance, and if so, what significance does it have? For example, does it have historic sociological significance? Theological significance? How can we tell?
3. Is it legitimate to say that the Bible reveals God using both male and female images? Or is that going beyond the evidence? Is it legitimate to say that God reveals herself using both male and female images in the Bible?

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these texts are not all modern compositions written by feminist men and women (as if that would be alarming!), but some texts are centuries old and socially and theologically conservative. The existence of these texts does not make them automatically desirable for current liturgical use.

<sup>15</sup> You might wish to take note of the lists in Standing Liturgical Commission, *Supplemental Liturgical Materials*, NY: Church Hymnal Corp., 1991, Appendix C on pp. 67-68 (47 hymns from the *Hymnal 1982* to avoid due to inherent sexism are in list A), but you might wish to enlarge list A with such hymns as these which have phrases like “Lord of lords”: 324, 460/1, 483, 494, 596. Although it is a routine translation of a biblical phrase, it is not a good translation. You could check Robert F. Klepper, *The Concordance to the Hymnal 1982 according to the use of the Episcopal Church*, Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1989, to locate such hymns.

<sup>16</sup> *The Lambeth Conference 1968: Resolutions and Reports*, London: SPCK & Seabury Press, 1968, p. 106.

4. Are any or all of the male images of God privileged or superior to the female images of God, and if so, in what way or ways, and for all purposes or just for certain purposes, in all circumstances or just in certain circumstances? For example, does Matthew 28:19 privilege that phrasing for the baptismal formula? If so, what about Acts 2:38, 10:48 and 19:5, where we read about people being baptized “in the Name of Jesus”?<sup>17</sup>

Another example: in John’s Gospel Jesus addresses God as Father 73 times, but before we jump to any conclusions, we should remember that John’s Gospel was written down last, and the one written first, Mark’s Gospel has Jesus addressing God as Father only once!<sup>18</sup> So was that metaphor really central to the teaching of Jesus? Would adding female images of God necessarily de-throne that paternal metaphor? Do we want to? Could Jesus’s use of *other* maternal imagery for God have been suppressed by biblical authors or writers of material the evangelists use, in addition to the examples we have of the mother hen image and the born-again image of the Holy Spirit?

5. Which Bible translations do the best job of eliminating sexism that was added in translation?<sup>19</sup> Do any go “too far”? Do we want to consult with somebody trained in sociolinguistics to understand these matters better?

### **Pastoral care aspects**

The biblical and historic examples of female images of God have some potential usage, at least occasionally, in pastoral care. In a few cases female images of God have proven to be of great pastoral value in particular circumstances, for males and females, following experiences of abuse by males or females or both.<sup>20</sup> Some research and resources on this subject have already been published in the last few decades, but there is certainly more to be learned.<sup>21</sup> The situations of pastoral need that come to mind are for dealing with

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<sup>17</sup> Are those passages in Acts an actual formula, or an allusion to the wording in Matthew, or a formula used only for Jews? Some Pentecostal Churches today use the baptismal phrasing “In the Name of Jesus” from Acts instead of the formula in Matthew 28:19, according to *Gender and the Name of God: the Trinitarian Baptismal Formula* by Ruth Duck. NY: Pilgrim Press, 1991, ISBN: 0-8298-0894-9, p. 159; this is a useful study with interesting history and relatively recent developments. Regarding the Acts formula also see pp. 124-5, 140-3, and 159-63. For the Pentecostal Church reference Duck cites J. G. Davies, *The New Westminster Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, p. 71, and says that at least until the thirteenth century the Roman Catholic Church accepted baptisms done in the “Name of Jesus” or in the “Name of Christ.”

<sup>18</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*. NY: Crossroad, 1992, pp. 81-82.

<sup>19</sup> For example, compare the NRSV New Testament with *The New Testament and Psalms: An Inclusive Version* edited by Victor Roland Gold, et al. Oxford University Press, 1995, ISBN: 0195284186. If it is out of print, try Amazon.com.

<sup>20</sup> I first learned of this c.1971 from an elderly Episcopal priest, the Rev. Kenneth deP. Hughes, of Cambridge, MA. Prayers of lamentation may also be useful. Whether the abuse is ordinary child abuse, child sexual abuse, or sexual abuse of adults, or domestic violence against adults, it can interfere with prayer to God imaged as male or female, depending on circumstances.

<sup>21</sup> Because this field is still developing and I only have limited experience using the resources I will not recommend any particular books.

people who have been abused by men, especially those who have been severely abused and/or those who have not yet undergone treatment, which can help to some extent, even years afterwards. Some such people, both adults and children, both males and females, sometimes report difficulty relating to male images of God, or specifically to father or to mother images of God. Even though it may be of real benefit that in the catholic Churches they can be encouraged to pray to female saints, sister disciples, asking their prayers, it may be equally or more important to them that some female images of God from the Bible and tradition are available. If they have been abused by their mothers, in addition to abuse by men, then extra care will need to be taken to make use of the non-maternal female images of God. Isaiah 49:15-16a may also be useful. In my pastoral experience these unexpected resources can be re/sources of considerable grace.

People who have found the male images of God especially valuable, even healing, may need reminding that they are not being asked to devalue or abandon male images of God or to dislike the male images, nor are they being asked to like the female images. Because God reaches different people through different images, they may need reminding, for example, that perhaps the gardener prefers the image that Christ is the vine and we are the branches. In their private prayers and devotions they should continue to use whatever images God has used to reach and bless them. The public liturgy, in contrast, must reach everybody, and while it will continue to use male imagery, it will also use female images and vine images and other images, especially biblical images.

It may be desirable to schedule para-liturgical hymn sings several times a year for people to sing those hymns they like which have been retired or rarely used liturgically. This way they can be enjoyed by some, but not imposed *liturgically* on anybody.

### **Looking toward the future**

Caroline Walker Bynum writes in the introduction to *Gender and Religion* that the contributors to that book “find the meaning of symbols, myths, and rituals too multilayered, too complex in its relationship to social structure and social values, to feel confident either that new rituals are easily created or that radical excisions of traditional symbols will have predictable results.”<sup>22</sup> This makes sense to me, and because I am not proposing either the radical excision/elimination of male images of God or the creation of new rituals, merely the gradual expansion of a minor theme in liturgical imagery, it does not trouble me to suggest the considerable expansion of the liturgical use of female images of God. On the next page she observes that the contributors to the book “argue that those who wish to effect the sort of changes [in world religions] that will let women’s experiences speak may need to work, not to substitute female-referring symbols for male-referring symbols, but to open new symbolic modes.”<sup>23</sup> I wonder if the interaction of linguistic, auditory and visual elements reinforcing each other would or does (or has begun to) function as such a mode, in the context of a liturgy without sex

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<sup>22</sup> Bynum *et al*, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

role stereotypes and with an overall balanced pattern of female and male images of God. How might God work through us, what might God be saying to and through us?

Although shifting the imbalance of divine imagery in liturgy by adding more female images of God *could* have unpredictable results, (which might be especially likely if changes were introduced abruptly or without explanation, something which is contraindicated and which I would never propose), it might be *less* likely if several changes were gradually introduced over a period of years, which seems to be what is happening in many places. For example, language changes in many congregations have been combined with shifts in the staffing of up-front liturgical leadership. In fact, in many denominations the visible liturgical leaders for many years have been increasingly female, with girls and women, acolytes, choir members, eucharistic ministers and clergy. The time has come to add more female images of God to the liturgy, moving in stages toward a balance. By combining several modes of communication at once, **metaphoric** in liturgical language, **auditory and embodied** in readings and music led sometimes by girls and women, and **visual** in terms of girls and women as some of the liturgical leaders and assistants, (enhanced at times by such visual arts as banners, icons, statues, and stained glass) different messages can be and are communicated and reinforced by the cumulative and interacting means, compared to what was communicated forty years ago in worship services. Sometimes the medium (a female) is part of the message. Part of the message in worship thus sometimes is that God accepts and uses girls and women as worship leaders, as bearers of the Gospel, as representatives of the Trinity. It is not just the Church acting alone that does this, because the God the Holy Spirit has given different people different gifts, and the women and girls, made in the image of God are among those who can represent God in leading worship and proclaiming the Gospel, and that is Good News indeed! Sometimes this includes women clergy.

Now doesn't *balance* really sound conservative, conserving the whole breadth of male and female imagery for God from our biblical tradition? Doesn't it sound like an inspired, biblical solution to complaints about too much male wording for God? —not getting rid of the male words for God, just balancing them! Doesn't it sound like something to which the children of the Church, sons and daughters, grandsons and granddaughters can relate in a healthy and happy way? Pray God that it may be so!

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