



LUTHERAN  
theological seminary  
SASKATOON

# Inclusive Language Guidelines

Approved by the ELCIC's National Church Council

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## Introduction

Lutherans have a long history of proclaiming the love of God to all people. What has changed over the centuries is the language in which this “good news” is proclaimed. Historically, in Canada, the Lutheran Church was an immigrant church that ministered to settled and newly arrived immigrants. Lots has changed over the years, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC) finds itself in an increasingly pluralistic context which invites us to think anew about how we preach and live the gospel.

As we continue to learn and grow as God’s people, we gain new understanding of our world. When we name our complex history, it can assist us in repairing those broken relationships and moving us towards being a more inclusive church. Language becomes an important vehicle to proclaim God’s justice and well-being and reflects hospitality and welcome to all.

Below is a resource to support you in using inclusive language in your communities.

## Theological

The language we use for God takes its roots in the language of scripture. However, in the Bible male pronouns for God have been predominantly used throughout Christian history. While we understand the language we use for God to be of a metaphorical and symbolic nature, male gendered theological and liturgical pronouns for God can leave us with the impression that God is male. Using predominantly male gendered language when referencing God can leave many feeling excluded and diminished.

It is preferable, then, to reduce to a minimum the use of gendered pronouns when referring to God, and to use ‘God’ as the pronoun for God. While this may cause some awkward phrasing, it keeps us mindful of how God transcends human gender. Avoid pronouns like ‘He’, ‘His’, ‘Him’ when referring to God. Consider varied and diverse pronouns as an alternative.

The language of the Trinity requires particular attention. The terms ‘Father, Son and Holy Spirit’ are the traditional and historical formulations of the Trinity. While these terms connect us to historical and orthodox Christianity, alternate formulations for the Trinity, such as ‘Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier,’ can serve to deepen our understanding. The names for the persons of the Trinity are not intended to imply that they have gender. Instead, the names are signs to us, of who scripture speaks about.

In regards to the First Person of the Trinity, ‘The Father’ and ‘God’ may not be easily interchangeable. However, there are examples in scripture using female and mother metaphors

when speaking of God, including God who gives birth (Deut. 32:18), God as a nursing mother (Isaiah 49:15), and God as a woman in labour (Isaiah 42:14). It is important to remember that it is the relationship that the Father has to Jesus that is significant above the particularity of gender of a father. It is preferable to use varied, inclusive and diverse language when speaking of the First Person of the Trinity.

In regards to the Second Person of the Trinity, while Jesus' body was male in gender the incarnation's significance is God's connection to our humanity. It is preferable to minimize the use of the male pronouns for the Christ, so as not to connect the incarnation to maleness, but rather use names or titles when referring to the Second Person of the Trinity, e.g., Jesus, Christ, the Messiah, Saviour, companion or kin. It is also important to remember that it is Jesus' relationship to the Father that is significant above the particularity of the gender of a son. The use of varied, inclusive and diverse language when speaking of the Second Person of the Trinity is preferred.

In regards to the Third Person of the Trinity, there is no scripture or theological association of the male gender to the Holy Spirit. In Hebrew 'Spirit' or '*Ruah*' is grammatically female and scripture at times uses female metaphors for the Holy Spirit. It is preferable to use neutral pronouns as well as inclusive and diverse language when speaking of the Third Person of the Trinity, e.g. Spirit, Sanctifier, Sustainer.

### **Liturgical**

The language of worship and liturgy is constantly adapting and evolving as language and society changes around us. Diverse and inclusive liturgical language is preferable whenever possible. The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) is the ELCIC's approved translation of the Bible.

In worship and in liturgical language it is advisable to use inclusive language for people e.g. humanity, humankind, sisters and brothers and siblings, children of God, people of God rather than gender exclusive language e.g. mankind, men, brothers. It is also advisable to pay attention to metaphors and images that contrast 'black and white' and 'light and dark' for how they could be casting negative racial connotations. Finally, it is advisable to pay attention to images and metaphors for differently abled persons and how language can cast those who are 'lame', 'deaf' or 'blind' etc... in a negative context.

### **Interfaith Relationships**

Today in Canada there is a wide variety of spiritual and religious traditions and expressions. Our language is an important means to communicate our recognition of the diversity of human-kind's religious and spiritual traditions and a way to express our hospitality to all God's people.

Some things in particular to note are:

- It is important to recognize the diversity that is present within any religious or spiritual tradition. Not all Lutherans believe or live their faith in the same way so it is important to recognize the diversity of belief and expression that can also be present in other religious or spiritual traditions. Therefore, it is important to not make

broad sweeping statements about a particular religious or spiritual tradition but rather ask what is important for a particular member or group of a religious or spiritual tradition.

- We all live with previous knowledge and experience which organizes how we engage with others. In order to express hospitality to others it is important for us to recognize when our previous experience and knowledge might influence how we see or interact with others in ways that get in the way of sharing God's love for all. Sometimes it can be helpful to talk about our previous experience(s) and perceptions of others in order to be freer to interact in a way that is more hospitable.
- When we make reference to another religious or spiritual tradition's teachings, practices or sacred texts, it is important that we are accurate. Resources can be found online, at public libraries or from leaders of the particular religion or tradition that is being discussed to help us communicate in an informed manner.
- First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples vary widely in their spiritual traditions and practices. As a result of Christianity's influence, traditional teachings and practices were outlawed and often replaced by European religious teachings. In some instances, it resulted in traditional and European religious practices being hybridized, while in other situations, some Indigenous persons maintained their traditional teachings and practices in secret. In more recent years, there has been a recovery and revival of Indigenous traditional teachings and practices in many Indigenous communities. While there can be some similarities, First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples have varied practices even within communities, so it is important not to generalize about these practices, and to enquire respectfully about local practices.
- It is often very helpful to be curious with those who are of a different religion or spiritual tradition. What terms do they use to describe themselves or their religious practices? What is important for them that they would like us to know? What are the similarities and differences in the ways we approach the sacred? These can be very important conversations as we communicate and engage in ways that are respectful and express our openness to all God's people.

A helpful resource document developed by the ELCIC is:

<http://elcic.ca/ecumenical/documents/EncounteringPeopleOfOtherFaiths-InterfaithGuidelines.pdf>

### **Abilities/Disabilities**

Whenever we talk about abilities/disabilities, we reveal our understanding about what we perceive as normal. It is important to note that normal can be understood very differently depending on one's perspective. When we write about persons with varying abilities, remember the person comes first rather than abilities/disabilities.

Labelling or defining a person or group limits how we see them. Therefore, it is more helpful to use language that recognizes the whole person remembering that each of us have various challenges. For example, "a person who is blind", "a person with cystic fibrosis" or "a person who has dementia" recognizes the challenge and at the same time invites us to see the

totality of the person and not only the particular challenge. It is important to ask the person(s) with a particular challenge how they would want it to be identified.

It is also important to note that many chronic conditions and disabilities may or may not be visible. Therefore, attentiveness to our assumptions is important since there will be times when we will not be aware that someone is living with a disability, such as fibromyalgia, depression, or a hearing loss, to name a few.

### **Indigenous Peoples**

Recognizing that we are predominantly settlers, the ELCIC strives for right relationships with Indigenous peoples, and part of that commitment is to use appropriate language. Canada's Indigenous peoples are made of the First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples. Canada's Indigenous Peoples are made up of various cultures and languages.

Given that we are all treaty people, when possible, it is advisable to recognize the treaty area and/or traditional land of Indigenous peoples when gathering for worship or other events. Avoid using the term reserve, but instead treaty area, ancestral lands or home.

Resources for acknowledging treaty area and traditional land can be found on the ELCIC website: [elcic.ca/CompassionateJustice/IndigenousRightsandRelationships.cfm](http://elcic.ca/CompassionateJustice/IndigenousRightsandRelationships.cfm)

When speaking about First Nations, Inuit and Métis the plural 'peoples' is preferred, as the singular 'people' does not articulate the separate origins and identities of the various groups. Indigenous is the preferred term over Aboriginal, as signified by the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* ([www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/declaration-on-the-rights-of-indigenous-peoples.html](http://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/declaration-on-the-rights-of-indigenous-peoples.html)).

First Nations are made of various and diverse peoples, so it is advisable to use the specific names of nations, communities or bands when referring to First Nations.

Métis people are historically the descendants of French fur trappers and Indigenous women, but over time the term Métis has come to refer to people of mixed European and Indigenous ancestry across Canada, and a specific community of people—defined as the Métis Nation—which originated largely in Western Canada and emerged as a political force in the 19th century, radiating outwards from the Red River Settlement. However, not all people of mixed ancestry consider themselves Métis.

Inuit people are Indigenous peoples who live in or are descended from people originating from Canada's North. The singular of Inuit is Inuk.

Language use to respectfully and correctly identify and speak about Indigenous People's is always evolving and so it is advisable, when given the opportunity, to ask how people would like to be identified.

### **Introduction: Gender, Gender Identity, Sexual Orientation**

Our communities are filled with diverse populations who reflect the beauty of God's good creation. As we gather, we can welcome people by using language that actively reflects the variety of identities we have come to know within our context.

Women and men, transgender and non-binary people, members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, two-spirit, asexual, and heterosexual communities—regardless of age—deserve to have their individual identities, titles, and pronouns respected and upheld within their communities of faith. While it isn't required to know all of these terms, it is critical that we have a general understanding of the range of identities we have been gifted with by God and reflect that in our use of language with one another.

### **Gender**

As we consider the language we use it is important to acknowledge the historical and subconscious ways masculinity has come to limit the diversity of language expressed within our communities. In focusing our attention toward inclusive language, we actively work to re-centre our communication in more inclusive ways.

For example, when addressing groups of people, choose a neutral term that can encompass all genders and identities present, such as: everyone, folks, friends, y'all, young adults, or children. Similarly, terms that make distinctions based on gender can be replaced with inclusive alternatives like: humankind, families, spouse or partner, siblings, ancestors or people of God. If gendered terms must be used within a group setting try to incorporate a spectrum of identities by saying: brothers and sisters and siblings, husbands and wives and partners, friends and kin and family.

Another way to practice this is to avoid gendering roles or actions when talking about positions, opting for more inclusive options such as: president, chairperson, office administrator, spokes-person, supervisor, workforce, server, volunteer, constructed or of human origin. Likewise, titles, honorifics and pronouns should be used consistently for all people mentioned in stories or articles. However, if an individual objects to a term used to describe them, respect their request and remove the word or title.

### **Gender Identity / Gender Expression**

The promotion of gender inclusive language also acts to support a welcoming community where all individuals can avoid unnecessary distinctions or assumptions surrounding their gender identity and gender expression. An individual's gender identity is their internal perception of their gender, which informs the pronouns they use, how they choose to identify themselves, and how they experience their gender regardless of their sex or outward gender expression. An individual's gender expression is the external presentation of one's gender identity through a combination of clothing, appearance, social behaviour, pronouns and other societal factors. It is also important to note that one's gender identity or expression is not necessarily connected with their sexual orientation.

Common identities for an individual's gender may include male, female, transgender or non-binary. These labels are often used as umbrella terms to describe how an individual communicates their gender within the world. It is important to remember that the gender identity of an individual may not conform to social expectations about gender based on anatomy and appearance, or to the gender assigned that individual at birth. As this is the case, it is inappropriate to ask a transgender or non-binary person about their bodies or personal medical history.

If you are unsure of a person's name, pronouns or gender identity, share your own before politely asking the individual to share their name, pronoun and identity with you. Affirm that you will respect their shared identity in response—even if you have previously known them by another name or pronoun.

### **Terminology**

**Cisgender:** an umbrella term used to describe a person whose gender identity is congruent with the sex they were assigned at birth.

**Gender Binary:** the idea that there are only two genders and that every person is one of those two.

**Gender Expression:** the external display of one's gender, through a combination of dress, demeanor, social behavior, pronouns and other societal factors.

**Gender Identity:** the internal perception of a person's gender and how they label themselves, or how a person feels on the inside regardless of their sex or gender expression. Common identity labels include man, woman, transgender, non-binary, gender queer and more.

**Intersex:** an umbrella term used to describe a spectrum of people who have a combination of chromosomes, gonads, hormones, internal sex organs and genitals that differs from the assumed gender binary.

**Non-binary:** a gender identity that indicates a person who identifies outside of the gender binary for any number of reasons. Common identity labels include gender fluid, gender queer, gender variant, agender, neutrois, gender neutral, enby, or androgynous.

**Pronouns:** a term used to describe personal gender pronouns often used during introductions to reflect one's gender identity and expression. Common pronouns include: she/her/hers, he/him/his, they/them/their, xe/ xem/ xyr, and many other gender neutral options.

**Sex:** a medical term used to refer to the chromosomal, hormonal and anatomical characteristics that are used to classify an individual as female, male, or intersex at birth.

**Transgender (trans):** an umbrella term used to describe a spectrum of people who experience a disconnect between their sex and their gender identity or whose sex and gender identity are incongruent with the sex they were assigned at birth.



**Two-Spirit:** an umbrella term traditionally used by some Indigenous Peoples to recognize individuals who possess qualities or fulfill roles of multiple gender identities.

### **Sexual Orientation**

As we reflect on the language we use, it is important to acknowledge the inherent ways heteronormative standards have come to limit the diversity that is expressed within our society. In focusing our attention toward inclusive language, we can actively work to re-centre our communication in ways that honour all loving and caring relationships.

The language we use to speak to lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, asexual and queer people can have a powerful impact on both our conversation and the welcome we extend. When we use inclusive language to refer to an individual's sexual orientation, we are actively respecting the identity of every individual. In doing so, we promote a safe and caring environment for all --whether they are a heterosexual (straight) or an LGBTQ2+ member of the community.

It is important to note that "Queer" is an acceptable in-group umbrella term, but it is best to avoid describing an individual or community as such unless they have specified that is how they wish to be identified. Similarly, one should avoid speculating about a person's sexual orientation, marital status, or family relations, unless they are invited into that conversation by the individual. The decision to invite someone into such a circle of knowledge is often called "coming out" and is a deeply personal and private decision made by the individual. Coming out is a continual, life long process through which one's gender identity, and /or sexual orientation is shared within society. As this is the case, one should never "out" or involuntarily share about another person's gender identity, and /or sexual orientation with anyone.

It is also important to be mindful of the appropriate terms to use when referring to LGBTQ2+ individuals and couples within your community. While some LGBTQ2+ couples use the term husbands or wives following their wedding—not all couples do. Whenever speaking to couples attempt to use inclusive terms such as spouse, partner, significant other, or other half, to accompany more traditional terms like husband and wife.

### **Terminology**

**Asexual:** A term that describes a spectrum of people who may feel no sexual attraction towards people of any gender, and /or people who may desire some level of romantic relationship with some people. Aromantic is a related term indicating someone who does not seek or desire a romantic relationship (as opposed to sexual).

**Bisexual:** a term that describes someone attracted to their same gender and to another gender.

**Coming Out:** The process by which one accepts and/or comes to identify one's own sexuality or gender identity, and the process by which one shares one's sexuality or gender identity with others. This is a continual, life-long process.

**Gay:** a term that describes a man who is attracted to men. Also used by some women.

**Heteronormativity:** the assumption by individuals, institutions or within society that heterosexual orientation / heterosexuality is superior to all other sexualities. Leads to invisibility and stigmatizing of other sexualities.

**Heterosexual or Straight:** a term that describes someone attracted to people of a different gender.

**Lesbian:** a term that describes a woman who is attracted to women.

**LGBTQ2 +:** an abbreviation or umbrella terms for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and/or Questioning and Two-spirit peoples. The addition of the + recognizes the diversity of unnamed identities the abbreviation often comes to represent.

**Outing:** involuntary or unwanted disclosure of another person's sexual orientation or gender identity.

**Queer:** for some, a reclaimed term used by members of the LGBTQ2+ community to describe people who identify as non-heterosexual, transgender, or who exist outside of the gender binary. Due to its historical use as a derogatory term, it is not embraced or used by all members of the LGBTQ2+ community.

**Polyamory (Polya):** a term that describes a spectrum of people who have an orientation towards consensual non-monogamous relationships.

### **Race and Ethnicity**

All persons share a common humanity. It is important to be inclusive and respectful of all cultural backgrounds and diversity. When we name our complex history with race and racism, it can assist us in repairing those broken relationships and moving us towards being a more inclusive church.

Generalizations and stereotyping based on race or ethnicity should not be used. Avoid identifying people by race, colour or national origin, unless it is appropriate for context, but do not assume a person's appearance defines their nationality or culture defines their nationality or cultural background.

Avoid singling out specific cultures or drawing undue attention to ethnic or racial background. When references are relevant and necessary, find the appropriate, accepted terminology and use the language preferred by the individual or group concerned.

Capitalize proper names of nationalities, peoples, races and tribes: e.g. Indigenous Peoples, Cree, Métis, Inuit, Arab, Caucasian, Jew, Latin, Asian, Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, Orthodox, French-Canadian, Asian. Black is acceptable in references to people of African descent. In the



United States, African-American is used; in Canada, African-Canadian is sometimes used but not as frequently. Black and white do not name races and are lowercase.

Some references can have negative racial connotations, avoid vocabulary that carries hierarchical valuation or portrays groups as inferior, criminal, or less valued than others.

Some individuals feel that language such as minority, visible minority and person of colour (PoC) are outdated; while others may use these terms themselves to self-identify. Individuals and groups should be identified by the names they choose for themselves. When in doubt, ask.

### **Final Thoughts**

Language is an important vehicle in relationship building. It has power and not only conveys facts and ideas but also emotions and values. The use of inclusive language can reflect respect and honours the human dignity of all. Careful consideration of language benefits all people as we seek to communicate the love of God to all.

When there are questions or concerns that you have about how to best honour inclusive language in a unique context, engage those individuals and groups in conversation. Individuals and groups should be identified by the names they choose for themselves and their decisions should be affirmed.

Finally, when using this resource, please know that it is considered to be a living document that will constantly evolve.

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### **Sources**

In the preparation of this document, a number of resources were consulted including:

- Metropolitan Community Churches, Inclusive Language Guidelines <http://mccchurch.org/files/2017/02/MCC-Inclusive-Language-Guidelines-2017.pdf>
- Queen's University, Inclusive Language Guidelines, [www.queensu.ca/styleguide/inclusive\\_language](http://www.queensu.ca/styleguide/inclusive_language)
- HR Council for the Nonprofit Sector, Diversity at Work: Inclusive Language Guidelines [www.hrcouncil.ca/hr-toolkit/diversity-language-guidelines.cfm](http://www.hrcouncil.ca/hr-toolkit/diversity-language-guidelines.cfm)
- Its Pronounced Metrosexual, Comprehensive\* List of LGBTQ+ Vocabulary Definitions [www.itspronouncedmetrosexual.com/2013/01/a-comprehensive-list-of-lgbtq-term-definitions/](http://www.itspronouncedmetrosexual.com/2013/01/a-comprehensive-list-of-lgbtq-term-definitions/)
- The Pride Center of Edmonton, "Affirming Sexual Orientation, Gender Expression and Gender Identity" Educational Guide, 2017
- Canadian Encyclopedia