

Non-binary language in worship

A reflection by Ruth Yorke

There is a phenomenon that once you start noticing something, you notice it everywhere – in the case of language, conversations with people and subsequent reading affects my understanding of language and how important it is.

Having met and listened to people who are intersex* and people who are non-binary*, I realise how much of our language is (often unnecessarily) binary* and gender-based*. [*See glossary of terms below.*] There are hymns I have sung for years but now I notice that they refer, for example, to ‘men and women’ or ‘brothers and sisters’ when they mean ‘everyone’. Previously, I hadn’t noticed that I was unintentionally singing about a world, or a loving God, which/who somehow didn’t include all people.

I don’t query the inclusive intention of the writers – but language changes, and also people are feeling more able to explain who they are: being intersex or non-binary is nothing new, but more people are sharing who they are and giving the rest of society the opportunity to listen and consider.

Knowing this, it becomes difficult to sing some hymns and songs as they are. But we have a slight conundrum. We don’t want to use language which excludes people, but we can’t actually change the words of written hymns in print or on screens due to copyright.

One helpful suggestion for general use in worship can be found in The Methodist Church’s [Theology for Safeguarding Report](#) (adopted by Methodist Conference 2021). This asks those leading worship to make a deliberate effort to use varying language around names for God and gender pronouns for God (she/he/they). If, for example, I like addressing God as ‘Father’, that’s fine, but maybe sometimes I could also use ‘Creator’ or ‘Mother’ or ‘Eternal One’ (for example) so that people who struggle with God-as-Father can, sometimes at least, feel more able to engage with God in worship.

We can address language around gender of people with a similar approach. We don’t need to NEVER say ‘men and women’ or ‘brothers and sisters’, but we could sometimes instead say, ‘everyone’ or ‘all people’ or ‘siblings’.

As we've said, where they occur in hymns, printed words or those on screens/online must be as written by the author. However, there is nothing to stop us actually singing words which are more inclusive, and inviting members of the congregation to do that if they would like to. For example, in our singing of [Brother, sister, let me serve you](#) (StF 611), we could begin some verses with 'Siblings won't you let me serve you'; 'men and women' can also scan as 'all God's people' or 'all created'. It will probably be helpful first to discuss this with your church's worship consultation or planning group and to make information available so that people know why this is being suggested. (Useful links for information below.)

Though change takes time, we have demonstrated that much can be done. Where language has changed and many people no longer understand 'man' as 'all humanity', efforts have been made to include women. Previously, they were the 'unmentioned', making it unclear whether they were included or not. Many authors have enabled their hymns and songs to be updated to reflect the change in use of language. This is a call to make a considered and effective effort to include other genders.

The experience of exclusion – even unintended exclusion – runs very deep, and even a small attempt to be more inclusive can make a huge difference. But more than this, inclusion is a justice issue. And the God who wants to include us all does want us to consider each other. God is not about some people feeling like 'insiders' and others being 'outsiders' – we are all welcomed in, all given a seat at God's table.

It is true to the intentions of hymns to make the language more inclusive as we sing. The written word cannot keep up with changes in language and understanding, but we can honour the inclusive intention, and our inclusive God, by singing words which include everyone.

Ruth Yorke is a member of the Methodist Diaconate and ministers with The Church at Carrs Lane, Birmingham.

Glossary of terms:

***binary language** for gender is language which uses only two options, e.g. men and women, boys and girls, brothers and sisters, male and female.

***gender** is about how we identify and how we live our lives. This may or may not be the same as our biological sex.

***intersex** means someone who is born with two sets of sexual organs – usually one being external and the opposite sex organs inside. Intersex people have always been part of humanity but it is often not understood at birth that the person is not the biological sex indicated by the external characteristics at birth. People who are intersex may begin life believing they are of the sex they externally appear to be but, usually in puberty, it becomes apparent that they are not that sex. Sometimes parent/s are told soon after birth, and the parents decide which sex the child will be brought up as, unless they bring up the child aware of being intersex.

***non-binary** means someone who does not identify in a binary way, i.e. they do not identify as male or female. There is a growing understanding that there are many more genders than we have previously understood. People who do not identify in binary terms may identify, for example, as non-binary, gender queer, a-gendered, gender fluid. These are all non-binary gender identities.

*a fuller glossary has been compiled by Stonewall – generally regarded as a key and reliable source of information on sexuality and

gender: <https://www.stonewall.org.uk/help-advice/faqs-and-glossary/list-lgbtq-terms>