

## **INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE AND IMAGERY ABOUT GOD (1992)**

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### **SUMMARY OF REPORT**

Language is a precious gift of God. We need, however, to be vigilant in case our understanding is distorted or impoverished by language that is inappropriate. Ill chosen language may both express and encourage attitudes which are unworthy or beliefs which are inadequate or false. When we 'name' reality we can so easily define it on our own terms. Much attention has recently been given to the way in which the use of 'male' words may leave women feeling marginalized and so fail to express our conviction that male and female are both made in the image of God. A commitment to 'inclusive language' when speaking about ourselves draws attention to the imagery we use when speaking of God. Our tradition tends to use exclusively male imagery when it talks of God and also when it addresses God. This report argues that the rich resources of male imagery should continue to be used. It asks, however, if it is appropriate to balance and complement male imagery with female. It argues that it is appropriate. Such imagery is consistent with Scripture – and indeed Scripture gives significant examples. Such imagery expresses the conviction that God is neither male nor female, whilst male and female are together made in the divine image. It argues that our understanding of God has been in some respects impoverished by the exclusive use of male imagery, and that in the balance and tension between male and female imagery a richer vision of God is given.

The report now presented to the Methodist Conference by the Faith and Order Committee has been written by a working party set up by the Committee in response to various motions presented to the Conference. The working party consisted of: the Revd Anne E. Gibson, Dr. Judith Lieu, the Revd Judith I. Maizel,

Mrs Janice Sutch Pickard, the Revd Neil G. Richardson, the Revd Rosemary Wakelin, with the Revd Dr. John A. Harrod acting as convener.

## INTRODUCTION

### (1-6) The general debate about inclusive language

1) As recently as fifteen years ago so called 'exclusive language' was very widely used in Britain and only rarely questioned. By 'exclusive' language we mean 'male' words such as 'man', 'men', 'mankind', 'forefathers', used to refer to both males and females. In *The Methodist Service Book*, published in 1975, such language is used throughout. There are prayers for 'all men' even though we intend to include women and children. We declare that 'man' is made in God's image, even though the divine image is seen equally in women; we confess that we have sinned against our 'fellow men' even though we sin at least as much against women and children. <sup>(1)</sup> Women may thus become 'linguistically invisible'. <sup>(2)</sup> Children likewise may become 'invisible' through the use of this language.

2) It is sometimes argued that objections to such language rest on a failure to see that words such as 'man' have two meanings. 'Man' may be used to refer to a male human being, and also to all human beings in general. There is a measure of truth in this objection, but it still misses the main points. One significant reason why 'male' words have been so used in our language has been the widely held belief that the male is the norm of the human. <sup>(3)</sup> Furthermore, apart from this consideration, this usage is increasingly heard as being exclusive, and when this is so it is inadequate simply to refer people to a dictionary. After all language develops and meanings change. This remains true even though 'exclusive' language is often both used and heard quite innocently by those who understand it to refer to both women and men. The universal reference, without any 'sexist' connotations, is immediately understood. For many who believe in the equality and full humanity of male and female, however, the continued use of exclusive male language is an anachronism which fails to express their belief. Finally, even if the word 'man' may be understood as referring to both women and men this is not so readily the case with words such as 'brotherhood', 'forefathers', and also the plural 'men'.

3) It is thus increasingly recognized that such language often has the effect of making women feel marginalized and men feel embarrassed. These feelings need to be taken seriously, but the issue, as suggested in the above paragraph, is not primarily one concerning the feelings of what may still be only a minority. The fundamental issue is not our response to current trends and pressures but rather the nature of the gospel and our Christian conviction that women and men are together made in the image of God. This places upon us the obligation to express that conviction in our language. Hidden signals are implicit in all the language we use. Language moulds as well as expresses our thinking and feeling. Because of this, 'exclusive' language may reinforce the idea that the male is normative and the female in some way or other inferior. Critics of exclusive language seek to correct a flaw deeply embedded in our thinking, theology and culture, a flaw which has distorted our thinking of God and of humanity.

4) Since we share the conviction that women and men are together made in the image of God this report welcomes and wishes strongly to encourage the practice of speaking 'inclusively'. We may speak of 'humankind' or 'everyone' rather than of 'mankind', of 'people' or 'everyone' rather than of 'men', and of our 'mothers and

fathers before us' instead of our 'forefathers'. Sisters should be specified and not simply assumed to be included with the brethren. Some such changes in our *Methodist Service Book* have already been authorized by the Conference. The word 'humankind' is not an ugly modernism. It has been part of our language at least since the seventeenth century. It is used, for example, in Dryden's translation of the hymn 'Creator Spirit by whose aid'.<sup>(4)</sup> Sentences may often be rendered inclusive by a simple change from the singular to the plural. Thus instead of saying: 'when a man grows older he . . .' we can say 'when people grow older they . . .' Some have also proposed a wider use of the words 'they' and 'their' as a way of making a singular subject universal. Miller and Swift give examples – for instance 'Nobody prevents you, do they?' (Thackeray), and 'It is enough to drive anyone out of their senses' (Shaw).<sup>(5)</sup> It is usually not difficult to adopt such an inclusive style of speech – although it requires effort and commitment to overcome the habits of a lifetime. Even so, thought and sensitivity are required – as for example when references to 'men and women' appear to exclude children. Occasionally an inclusive equivalent – especially one that does not lead to clumsy or ugly expressions – is not easy to find. Generally, however, inclusive language may be just as elegant and pleasing to the ear.

5) Attempts have been made to make the language of traditional hymns and prayers less exclusive, and we believe this should be encouraged. Rupert Davies' skilful paraphrase of the fourth verse of Luther's classic 'A safe stronghold our God is still' is an example.<sup>(6)</sup> A hymn sung at Methodist ordinations has the 'men' of *The Methodist Service Book* replaced by 'us' in *Hymns & Psalms*.<sup>(7)</sup> Hymns have from time to time been altered for various reasons, so when hymns are changed to make language more inclusive we are doing nothing new. It may not, however, be possible to alter all traditional texts. Some alterations, based on the belief that all language must be fully inclusive, appear forced. Some valued hymns and traditional prayers may stubbornly resist attempts to make their language inclusive. Again, there needs to be a proper respect for the literary quality and integrity of the material. Sometimes we have to accept that our literary heritage cannot always be made to share our sensitivities. *The United Methodist Hymnal* of the American United Methodist Church amends the line of a Wesley carol 'Pleased as man with men to dwell' to 'Pleased with us in flesh to dwell'<sup>(8)</sup>, but for reasons such as these, and sometimes for theological considerations as well, not everyone agrees with this change. The obligation to use language as inclusive as possible, however, remains; and especially for the writing of new hymns and liturgy.

6) These issues are relevant to all kinds of speech but never more relevant than when we are considering the language of worship. Special care should be given to such language because our language in worship not only expresses but also moulds our theology during an activity when our minds and emotions should be fully alert. In worship, as on other occasions, we transmit values through language. 'Christians are formed by the way in which they pray, and the way they choose to pray expresses what they are.'<sup>(9)</sup> It is imperative that the church should reflect critically about the language it uses. Those who lead worship should remember how alienating to some can be the constant use of words such as 'men', 'mankind', 'brethren', 'forefathers' etc. Such language can also reinforce beliefs about the normative character of the male.

## LANGUAGE AND IMAGERY ABOUT GOD

**(7-13) Whilst much imagery about God has no gender much is nonetheless explicitly male. We need the rich resources of such imagery, but it needs to be balanced with female imagery, thus correcting distortions and giving us a richer and more adequate way of speaking of God.**

7) We believe that a commitment to 'inclusive' language is rooted in our understanding of the gospel – in particular in our conviction that women and men are together made in the image of God. We need further to ask – and this is the theme of this report – if the language and imagery we use about God adequately expresses this conviction. Indeed, even if talk, for example, about the human race as 'man' be allowed questions concerning the appropriateness of the language we use when speaking of God remain. In recent years a commitment to inclusive language has directed attention to our language about God. But the latter is only related to and is not dependent upon the former. Of course the words we use when speaking of God often have no gender. God may be described as creator, almighty, eternal, loving, gracious, judge, merciful, deliverer, disturber, healer, lover, beloved, comforter, sustainer, enabler, saviour, redeemer, and in many other ways that have no particular gender connotation. Many of these descriptions are found in the Bible. Whilst it may be felt that words such as 'almighty' have (however loosely) a certain 'masculine' feel about them, others may be heard as having a more 'feminine' dimension.

8) Again, Christians have almost always insisted that God, being neither male nor female, is beyond human gender; although our experience of being male and female may give us some insight into the nature of God in whose image we are made. This is important because there is evidence that some people think of God as being in some sense 'male'. Perhaps this is in part due to the influence of male imagery that we widely use; and in part due to the belief that God was incarnate in the male Christ. The belief that God is in some sense male lacks coherence – since it is unclear what might be *meant* by speaking of God as male. After all, God has no physical body. Despite its incoherence in some quarters this belief remains strong.

9) The rich resources of gender-neutral imagery need to be fully used. Such imagery helps to avoid the distortion caused by an overuse of explicitly male imagery. Wesley's hymns 'What shall I do my God to love' and 'Thy ceaseless unexhausted love' are hymns not untypical of Wesley in their lack of gender imagery.

10) It remains true, however, that much of the language about God most widely used by Christians does have a gender; and this is almost invariably male. Sometimes it appears almost strident in its maleness. This is the case even though, as will be indicated shortly, this usage does not accord fully with either the Bible or strands of the later Christian tradition. Certainly in general 'church-speak' God is described as 'Lord', 'King' and 'Father', more frequently than in most other ways; and added to this of course is the use of the personal pronoun 'He'.

11) We need to note certain distinctions. There is a distinction between EXCLUSIVE LANGUAGE (when 'male' words are used to refer to both men and women) and MALE IMAGERY when speaking of God – as when we speak of God as 'Father', 'King' or 'Lord'. It is also important to make a distinction between the concepts MALE and FEMALE on the one hand and the concepts MASCULINE and FEMININE on the other. The former pair simply refer to gender. Images such

as 'king', 'father', and 'brother', are MALE images because only males can be kings, fathers and brothers. Similarly, 'queen', 'mother' and 'sister', are female images because only females can be queens, mothers and sisters. The concepts MASCULINE and FEMININE are more elusive. They refer to qualities and characteristics – called 'masculine' or 'feminine' because of a rough (but only rough) correspondence perceived to exist between them and gender. It might be claimed that in some cases this correspondence is inherent to a particular gender. More usually, however, it is argued that these qualities and characteristics derive largely from stereotype, culture's expectations, and the way in which people are brought up. Later in the report we will give examples of the way in which our culture tends to think of certain qualities as masculine and of others as feminine.

12) It follows that an image might be gender neutral in the strict sense – but still have 'masculine' or 'feminine' overtones. If we speak of God as 'almighty sovereign over all' we are using a gender neutral image, but many would argue the image is still largely MASCULINE since in our culture masculinity tends to be associated with dominance and control. Likewise if we speak of God patiently nurturing us, again the image is gender neutral, but some would argue it is a largely FEMININE image since in our culture the willing ability patiently to nurture the young tends to be thought of as a more feminine quality. The whole area bristles with difficulties. We cannot be precise about culture's expectations; and neither women nor men conform to their stereotypes – people of both sexes giving ample evidence of having both 'feminine' and 'masculine' characteristics (as our culture deems them to be). It is nonetheless difficult to deny that our understanding of God has been significantly influenced by the dominance of male and masculine imagery. Sometimes our culture's male stereotypes have been projected onto God. Imagery that is gender neutral may still be largely 'masculine' in its overtones. We do not address adequately the problem of the dominance of male/masculine imagery simply by addressing the problem of imagery's gender.

13) In this report, therefore, we ask if our understanding of God has been distorted and impoverished by an almost exclusive use of male imagery. We ask also if it is appropriate to use female imagery, alongside the male, when we seek to put into words our understanding of God; and also when we address God in prayer and worship. We are convinced that it is appropriate and we wish now to offer four major considerations which amplify and give weight to this conviction.

#### **a) THE WITNESS OF SCRIPTURE AND THE LATER TRADITION**

**(14-28) It is pointed out that Scripture uses a very wide range of images when speaking of God, including significant examples of female ones. It is argued that when Scripture speaks of God as 'Father' it is the ideal parenthood and not the maleness of God that is meant. It is further suggested that Scripture itself engages in a constant search for a more adequate language with which to speak of the richness of God and invites us to engage in a similar search – although of course always guided by Scripture. It is claimed that a contemporary concern to find a feminine dimension to God has firmer roots in the Bible than is sometimes realised.**

14) All Christians accept the authority of Scripture, even though they may differ in their understanding of the nature of this authority. They may also differ over how Scripture is to be interpreted and used. We begin by asking about the witness of Scripture concerning our theme.

15) First we note that the Bible does speak of God in terms of female imagery. Isaiah uses a woman's experience of nurturing her children as a metaphor of the divine care (Isaiah 46, 3-4) A similar image is used in Deuteronomy 32, 18:

'You forsook the creator who begot you and ceased to care for God who brought you to birth.'

In Isaiah 42, 14 God is also compared to a woman who cries in labour:

'Now I groan like a woman in labour panting and gasping'

Elsewhere we read in Isaiah:

'As a mother comforts her son so shall I myself comfort you'  
(66, 13)

Another verse in Isaiah does not speak directly of God by using female imagery. It is nonetheless worth quoting as an example of the prophet's willingness to compare and contrast the care of God with that of a mother for her child:

'Can a woman forget the infant at her breast, or a mother the child of her womb? But should even these forget, I shall never forget you.' (49, 15)

The Psalmist speaks of our relationship to God as being:

'like a weaned child clinging to its mother' (Psalm 131, 2)

Likewise, in Psalm 22, 9 God is spoken of in terms of the image of a midwife. Another Psalm – number 139 – speaks of the awareness of God being like the knowledge a mother has of the child in her womb; a special experience enjoyed only by women. Jesus once compared his own experience to that of a hen gathering her brood under her wings (Matthew 23, 37 and Luke 13, 34) and in John 16, 21 Jesus appeals to the image of the woman in labour. It is important to look at the biblical material as a whole and not simply at those parts that have been highlighted by a largely 'male centred' culture.

16) In spite of these examples the Bible usually speaks of God in male terms. This may be partly because of assumptions about the priority of the male, and partly in order to maintain a sense of separateness from their religious contemporaries who sometimes worshipped female gods. The way in which God is usually spoken of in Scripture has led some Christians to believe that the biblical imagery about God is invariably, inescapably and normatively, male. It follows that the introduction of female imagery involves a radical departure from the norm of Scripture. Christians are prevented by this norm from using female imagery. Such an understanding of Scripture is also held by those feminists who have become alienated from it. They claim the Bible is inherently 'male centred' (or 'patriarchal'). It makes God male and legitimizes patriarchal power and oppression. It is therefore irredeemably alien to those who insist upon the fundamental equality of women and men. Both of these positions, quite apart from other considerations, neglect the place that female imagery *does* have in Scripture.

17) Even though God is sometimes spoken of in Scripture in terms of female images, the image that is central in the New Testament (although it is sparingly used in the Old) is that of Father. We need, though, to ask what is meant by speaking of God as Father. The metaphor does not imply that God is male. Indeed, as was suggested earlier, it is not clear what might be meant by speaking of God as male. It is rather the parenthood of God that is implicit.

18) This claim may be illustrated. When the Bible speaks of God as 'Father' or compares God to a human father, it may be speaking of God as the SOURCE or ORIGIN of humankind (e.g. Isaiah 64, 8 and Ephesians 3, 14). It may be speaking of God's CHARACTER (e.g. Psalm 103, 13 and Matthew 5, 48), or of God's AUTHORITY (e.g. John 3, 35 and 10, 29). These and other characteristics of 'fatherhood' cannot be confined to a male parent. To produce, to nurture and to care, to shape and direct – these are, to say the least, just as much qualities we cherish in the good mother as in the good father. Within the culture of Biblical times the image of Father, rather than the image of Mother, was almost inevitable for speaking of, for example, the authority of God (although not necessarily all aspects of God's nature) but it remains the case that what is meant by the fatherhood of God is not intrinsically male.

19) Our discussion of the metaphor 'Father' leads to a second point (although the argument of this report does not rely on it). There is nothing necessarily unchanging or unchangeable about the Bible's language and imagery. The biblical writers themselves often regard their language as only provisional. They are constantly searching for more adequate ways of speaking of the unfathomable richness of God. Human crafted words and images are always inadequate. This implies that we are not bound in our interpretation of biblical texts to retain at every point the biblical language. It is therefore not surprising that in its language about God the Bible uses an astonishingly wide range of images. Faithfulness to Scripture does not tie us at all points to the language of the biblical text. It does involve a continuation of that search for the most appropriate way of expressing God's revelation. Thus, on biblical grounds, we sometimes may go beyond the Bible's own language and imagery.

20) This remains true even though there is continuity as well as fluidity in biblical language about God. In the New Testament usage 'Father' is a constant image and form of address even if it is more common in some books (e.g. John's Gospel) than in others (e.g. Hebrews). Faithfulness to the biblical witness involves a continued use of this central image. The image 'father' may indeed be primary to the tradition in which we stand, and it remains so in contexts in which the church wants to emphasise its continuity with the tradition. These considerations, however, do not preclude the use of other images alongside it in contemporary usage.

21) The biblical writings themselves, then, do not encourage the making of their own texts into an idol, but rather point beyond the text to God who is greater. Isaiah insists that nothing can be likened to God (40, 19ff). God is one 'whose thoughts are higher than our thoughts and ways higher than our ways'. This does not prevent the prophet from using a rich range of images – but they are all inadequate and subject to being superseded, or corrected and balanced, by others.

22) It is, therefore, not surprising to discover within the language the biblical writers use to speak of God a process of selection, refinement and innovation. In the New Testament we find evidence of a selective use of traditional language in Paul's tendency to avoid 'Israel centred' expressions, such as 'the God of Jacob'. In Matthew's gospel the expression 'Kingdom of Heaven' is frequently, but not always, substituted for 'Kingdom of God' – the expression commonly used in Mark and Luke. John and Paul both explore bold new imagery – those of the 'Word' and the 'Last Adam' being examples. The second Isaiah gives a striking new dimension to the image of the 'exodus'. Within the Bible itself therefore, there is evidence that language about God was subject to re-evaluation. It was not fixed for all time.

Because the Bible gives examples of the attempt to find new imagery, in our contemporary attempt to find appropriate female imagery for our speaking about God we are but following Scripture's invitation to engage in a continued search for the most adequate language with which to express our conviction about God.

23) We must conclude that the Bible gives no support for the kind of Biblicism which rejects any departure from, or development of, biblical language and imagery. Christians often use words not in the Bible – for example words such as 'Incarnation' and 'Trinity'. By so doing, however, they are not necessarily departing from the biblical witness. We believe it is incumbent upon us to explore the nature of God to which the Bible bears witness by using female as well as male imagery. We are encouraged in this by the fact that the Bible speaks of God by appealing to a great variety of images. This includes some significant female imagery. The biblical writers implicitly invite their readers to do the same.

24) We move now to a new point. The issue concerns not simply the language Scripture uses about God. It concerns also the 'male centred' assumptions this language sometimes expresses. Such assumptions do underlie some of the biblical writing – but they are challenged and superseded elsewhere in Scripture. Indeed, we must not exaggerate the 'male centredness' of the Bible. In Genesis it is declared that men and women are both made in the divine image (Genesis 1, 28) and in Galatians it is declared that in Christ there is neither male nor female. (Galatians 3, 28) There is much in the ministry and teaching of Jesus which affirms women. Ephesians 5, 21ff., often quoted to support the 'headship' of men over women, is perhaps better seen as an example of an early Christian writer struggling to reassess the man-woman relationship in the light of our new life in Christ. What is impressive about the passage is not the way it confirms 'male centred' beliefs. It is rather the extent to which it manages to break free from them. This is through its stress on mutuality and the obligation of the husband to love and cherish his wife. 1 Corinthians 11 is a further example of a passage which illustrates the tension between the new and the old as Paul struggles to bring out the innovative implications of the gospel within the confines of an inherited understanding. It is untrue to say that the Bible is unqualifiedly 'male centred' in its assumptions. It rather contains a tension, often implicit, sometimes explicit, between 'male centred' structures and assumptions and the insight that in Christ there is 'neither male nor female'. (Galatians 3, 28)

25) We propose, therefore, that we are not for ever bound by the 'male centred' assumptions and expressions of parts of Scripture. In making this proposal we are using Scripture in a way illustrated by Scripture itself. In other words we are engaging in dialogue with our own tradition. Part of our gospel proclamation is that we are released from the inhibiting effects of static tradition. The Spirit may sometimes lead us to that which is new, draw out that which before has been only implicit, or remind us of that which has been forgotten. The biblical texts bear witness to a tradition which carries within itself the principle of self criticism; refining, further exploring, reapplying, correcting. The book of Job and many of the Psalms reflect critically upon the theology of history presupposed in, say, the books of Kings. The books of Ruth and Jonah offer a critique of the kind of theology found in Ezra and Nehemiah. James 1, 13 seems to be an early attempt to correct possible misunderstandings of the Lord's Prayer, and James 2, 14ff. and 2 Peter 3, 15ff. both offer critical comments of some themes (or misunderstandings of themes) in Paul's letters. God in graciousness and patience allows revelation to be mediated

through inadequate human channels. It is therefore only to be expected that the biblical writings will be characterized by self-criticism and innovation.

26) We conclude that the use of female imagery is compatible with faithfulness to Scripture – indeed that Scripture itself points in this direction, and also gives us examples of such imagery. In other words there is no incompatibility between language about God which is both ‘catholic’, in the sense of appealing to all and embracing all, including male and female, and ‘apostolic’, in the sense of keeping faith with its origins.

27) It is important to note (although we are not offering an ‘argument from tradition’) that female imagery is not absent from post-biblical Christian traditions. In speaking of Christ as ‘begotten’ of the Father, early Christian thought uses an image which embraces both male and female functions, even though the extent of the female contribution to procreation was not then understood. The use of this image even led the eleventh Council of Toledo in 675 to declare that Christ was begotten out of the Father’s womb (*de utero Patris*)<sup>(10)</sup>, Anselm and Julian of Norwich speak of Christ as our Mother, and there is a tradition using maternal imagery for God in twelfth century Cistercian monasticism.<sup>(11)</sup> It is true that the examples that can be found of such imagery prior to our own century are relatively few in number – although it remains possible, as some feminist scholars surmise, that some evidence has been lost, having been ‘edited out’ by historians influenced by the assumptions of a male centred culture.

28) Perhaps the most significant example of female imagery in the church’s history is to be found in talk about the Holy Spirit in female terms. Alwyn Marriage is one of a number of writers who have documented this.<sup>(12)</sup> She herself suggests the third person of the Trinity may appropriately be spoken of in female terms since the imagery used of the first and second is, through the weight of tradition and common usage, predominantly male. Furthermore, much of the activity of the Spirit – nurturing, sheltering, guiding, loving – is an activity which lends itself to female imagery. Marriage insists that the third person is coequal with the second and the first – otherwise Trinitarian theology simply reinforces the subordination of women to men. She also insists that God the Father is NOT ‘male’; neither is God the Spirit ‘female’. God transcends the divisions of our gender. God the Father may also be spoken of as Mother, and the Son is no less an exemplar of feminine virtues as masculine ones. Marriage argues, however, for the reasons stated, that there is a certain appropriateness about concentrating female imagery in our speaking of God the Spirit.

#### **b) ‘TO WHOM THEN WILL YOU LIKEN GOD?’ (ISAIAH 40, 18): THE METAPHORICAL CHARACTER OF LANGUAGE ABOUT GOD**

**(29-35) All human words are inadequate to speak of the unfathomable richness of God. They are but images that point to, whilst never capturing completely, the full truth of God. We need a variety of images which together give us a balanced picture. Some are indeed more significant than others, but those drawn from the human male need to be complemented by those drawn from the human female – as well as from other aspects of God’s creation.**

29) The second reason why we support the use of female imagery when speaking of God is because all language about God is ‘metaphorical’ or ‘analogical’ in character. By this we mean that words coined primarily to describe things within this world are never wholly satisfactory when used to speak of the richness of God.

Our human words are but 'images', 'models', 'similes', 'metaphors' and 'analogies'. They point in the direction of truth about God but never capture the fullness of divine truth completely. It follows that if we speak of God as, for example, Father, we mean that God is LIKE a human father in many significant respects. But it also follows that in significant respects God is UNLIKE a human father. One respect in which God is unlike a human father is that God is NOT male.

30) It is consistent with this that there is nothing inherently more appropriate about male as opposed to female imagery in our speaking of God. Our images of God must not become idols. If it is allowed that the father image is but an image, and if God is not male, then it is hardly consistent to insist that God must be spoken of in only male terms and in terms drawn only from the experience and role of MEN.

31) Reference was made in a previous paragraph to both similes and metaphors. Similes compare, whilst metaphors are applied directly. If we say God is 'like' a father, or acts towards us 'as' a father, we are using similes. If, by contrast, we say God 'is' our father we are using a metaphor. The distinction between simile and metaphor in language about God is largely a matter of grammar since the claim that God 'is' our father (metaphor) is but a shorthand way of saying God is 'like' a father (simile). The distinction has theological significance only insofar as we tend to use metaphors for the main images. Similes are more often used for the less significant ones. The fact remains, God is greater than any image and is never fully captured by any of them; although some of course may be central and others more peripheral. We need to use the rich resources of both metaphor and simile. Similes have the advantage of reminding us explicitly that God is greater than any image.

32) These conclusions are not affected by the fact that the word 'Father' often functions as a name for God. It is not, however, God's one and only 'proper name'. It is a name in the sense that it is a form of address – and for good reasons a fundamental one – but it is not the only form of address and thus not the only name.

33) If all our language about God is the language of metaphor and analogy we need a rich variety of images, which, qualifying one another, together give us a more adequate understanding of God than could possibly be given by one image, or a few images, alone. Scripture itself, as has been noted, speaks of God in an astonishingly rich and varied vocabulary. A similar richness is found in the hymns of Wesley. The more it is stressed that our language about God is the language of model and metaphor the more we imply that there is nothing intrinsically appropriate or necessary about our choice of MALE imagery. We then open the way for the use of female imagery by way of complement or corrective. Language is a human creation. Especially when speaking of God it is inadequate for its subject matter. It is fallible, and subject to correction when new insights arise or meanings change.

34) If all images are inadequate we need to be sensitive to the way in which some images might become less adequate with the passage of time. They may change their meaning as culture changes; they may even become lifeless. Images may die when they fail to evoke a response, or if they limit or hinder our experience of God. Whilst there can be no question that we should continue to make sensitive use of male images such as 'father' we believe our understanding of all language about God as analogical encourages the sensitive use of female imagery alongside this. An increasing number find themselves alienated by the dominant maleness of much traditional 'God-talk', and we believe this feeling is grounded in our quest for truth and in the stirrings of the Spirit.

35) If all the images we use to describe God are inadequate, and if the most adequate understanding is gained through allowing a large number of images to tumble over one another, it is not surprising to discover that some biblical imagery for God is derived from the non-human. Whilst the personal imagery is of course central, it may nonetheless still be said that God descends on Israel like a lion, panther or bear (Hosea 5:14). God's voice is like a mighty torrent (Ezekiel 43:2). God is a sun (Psalm 84:11; cf. Revelation 1:16). The practice of using imagery derived from the natural and animal world has, of course, continued in the history of Christian devotion and hymnody. If the use of female imagery is disallowed we are in effect saying that God may in principle be imaged in terms of every aspect of creation – except the human female; this position we believe to be intolerable.

#### c) 'MALE AND FEMALE HE CREATED THEM'

**(36-42)The biblical claim is that male and female are both made in God's image. If this is so it is appropriate to speak of God in terms of images drawn from both male and female life and experience – that is in terms of the whole of humankind created in God's image and not just half of it.**

36) A third reason for our claim derives from the insight expressed in Genesis that male and female are both made in God's image (Genesis 1:27). It follows that our human nature should give us some clue as to the divine nature in whose image we are made. This is true even though that image has been gravely distorted. Furthermore, our language about God is often meaningful only because that which we attribute to God is found also, if imperfectly, in our own nature and experience. Indeed, if we had no HUMAN experience of these qualities the meaning of our language about God would be difficult to make clear. When Feuerbach glibed that Christians make God in their own image<sup>(13)</sup> he was offering a salutary warning against the kind of complacency which presumes to speak of God but which in fact speaks only of ourselves 'in a loud voice'. The fact remains, if God is personal we cannot but speak of God in terms of our own image since our experience of ourselves is the only experience we have of what it is like to be personal.

37) Appeal has been made throughout this report to insight gained into the nature of God through our human experience. Because we are made in God's image it is proper to seek insight concerning God in the nature, reflection and experience, of those who are made in that image. The term 'experience' is admittedly somewhat vague, but it is difficult to find a better one to describe that awareness of truth about God filtered through our living – our thinking, feeling, doing and knowing.

38) It might be objected, however, that our knowledge of God comes not from our experience but rather from God's 'revelation'. It is not clear, though, that experience and revelation are opposed. The notion of revelation is valuable. It preserves the insight that God is not an inert object waiting to be discovered, but rather one who takes the initiative in making revelation to us. It is, further, a concept which enables us to highlight certain disclosures as having central significance. Revelation, however, has to be apprehended and understood – and that is through our experience. 'Experience' and 'revelation' are thus complementary. Even the revelation contained in Scripture had still to be apprehended through the experience and understanding of the biblical writers. Most Christians would agree that the biblical revelation may be confirmed and clarified in our own experience – although Christians may differ as to whether the mode of

revelation seen in Scripture is in some radical sense 'different in kind' from that through our experience in the here and now.

39) Christian theology then lives with a tension. On the one hand the image of God within us has been distorted, and so there are no grounds for claiming that every human trait or experience is a clue to the nature of God. We are capable of hatred and selfishness, but in God there is pure love. On the other hand the image has not been completely obliterated and so we may believe that what manifest themselves as the worthier human experiences and capacities may give us some insight into the nature of God. We speak of the love and mercy of God and our language is meaningful because we know what it is like as human beings to love and be loved, to show and to receive mercy. Of course there are areas of uncertainty; but the uncertainty does not prevent this from being a legitimate area of theological exploration.

40) Our experience of being human gives us some clue as to the nature of God. Our language about God makes sense because that which we attribute to God (e.g. mercy, love, etc.) often has echoes in our own experience. It follows that we should feel encouraged to take into account all human experience; and that means female as well as male. Furthermore, we need constantly to be aware of the extent to which the image of God in ourselves has been distorted. We must ask, therefore, if when MAN has made God in HIS own image it has been in terms of the distorted male image rather than in the richer image seen in women and men together. We believe that our finding in what it is like to be human some clue as to the nature of God will be more fruitful if we take into account the experience of both women and men – allowing the one to qualify, balance and scrutinize the other.

41) Talk of 'Men's experience' and 'Women's experience' is of course contentious and controversial. Are there 'inherent' differences between the sexes beyond the obvious biological ones? Or do the differences derive from culture? It is not necessary for us here to enter into this debate. Our western society has had and still may have expectations about what men should be and do. Insofar as this is so there is the danger that if God be spoken of exclusively in male terms we will project uncritically onto God our male stereotypes. As a result our image of God will be distorted. Maybe the sensitive use of more feminine imagery will help counteract this and so give a more balanced, and, it may be hoped, a more accurate understanding of God.

42) This is important, not only for our understanding of God, but also for our understanding of ourselves. Reflection upon the notions 'masculine' and 'feminine' (culturally relative maybe but no less real for that) helps to release both women and men from the constraints of sex stereotypes and culture's often cruel expectations of what a 'man' or a 'woman' ought to be and do.

#### **d) DISTORTED IMAGES OF GOD**

**(43-49) If male imagery alone is used when speaking of God a distorted picture may result since we fail to balance, complement and correct, it by the use of female imagery. Illustrations of possible distortions are offered – together with illustrations of how understanding of God may be enriched by drawing upon our understanding of the female and feminine which is also made in God's image.**

43) A fourth reason why we should use female imagery follows from the claim – hinted at in the above paragraphs – that the exclusive use of male imagery may give us a distorted picture of God. It is not that such male imagery has no place; we have argued it has. It is rather that a distorted picture may result if only male imagery is used. Male imagery needs to be qualified and balanced by the use of gender neutral and female imagery. For one thing, as we said earlier, an exclusive use of male imagery can give the impression that God is male, even though it is unclear what might be meant by claiming this of God.

44) There are other ways in which a near exclusive use of male imagery may distort our understanding of God; here we concentrate on but three examples. There is, first, the expectation widely held in the past in our western culture that the MALE is the one who controls and dominates. Masculinity has often been associated with toughness and having power over others. Now it is not suggested that all men are masculine in this sense; that this is an inherent male characteristic; or that women never act in this ‘masculine’ way. But it is true that this is the expectation of men often accepted in our culture; in the past at least, even if, happily, it is less so today. Now a problem with imagery about God which is exclusively male is that God will be readily portrayed in terms of this cultural expectation of what a male is expected to be. The patriarchal God will be one who behaves like the patriarchal male – relating to creation by command and decree and demanding a response of servile obedience. Alas, this caricature is uncomfortably close to how God has sometimes been represented in the Christian tradition, even though there is little support for it in the meaning the New Testament writers attach to the word ‘Father’ when applied to God. God is thought of as ‘high and mighty King of kings, Lord of lords, the only Ruler of princes’ who beholds us from a divine ‘throne’.<sup>(14)</sup> Such language has often been interpreted patriarchally, even though this is a misunderstanding of the way in which this imagery is often used in the Bible.

45) Such imagery indeed points to part of the truth. We must continue to speak of God as ‘Almighty’ and to listen to unedited versions of Handel’s MESSIAH. Indeed the gentleness of God is significant only because it is the gentleness of one who is supremely strong. A weakling has no alternative but to be gentle and vulnerable. Part of the Christian gospel is that the sovereign God chooses to be gracious. There is therefore another side to the truth – that God in patience and humility steps back from creation, and ‘lets be’. God respects the autonomy of creation, and acts less like a dictator, however benevolent, and more through the evocative power of a love which awaits a free response. God’s sovereignty is more a sovereignty of love than of controlling power. The monarchical king is after all seen supremely in the one who consented to be the suffering servant who was crucified. The exclusive use of male imagery has sometimes encouraged the kind of distortion which results from projecting male stereotypes onto God.

46) Secondly, many Christian thinkers have thought of God as being ‘impassible’. This means, strictly, that God is ‘without passion’ and it follows God cannot share in the suffering and anguish of the world. Our western culture – in its more recent English form at least – does tend to conceive of impassibility as a masculine ideal. The male must never show emotional vulnerability or be moved to tears! Of course this is only a tendency and one increasingly challenged – but a tendency nonetheless. Whilst the notion of God’s impassibility has many roots it seems probable that it has received some reinforcement from the projection onto God of this male ideal. Our culture’s expectation of the male is attributed to God imaged in

male terms. Some recent theology has widely questioned the idea of an unqualified divine impassibility. If God is love, so it is argued, then God must anguish over and share in the suffering of the world. Of course, God shares in the world's sufferings as God not as a human. God's perfect vision enables the divine suffering to be within the context of a divine serenity which sees things in proper perspective and is assured of the eventual fulfilment of the divine purpose. Our culture tends to think of the capacity to share in the anguish of the sufferer as being a feminine more than a masculine quality so here is an example of how feminine imagery may enrich our understanding of God and qualify an exclusive use of the masculine. In a similar way, women experience powerlessness and vulnerability often more acutely and more frequently than do men, or at least men who write books and influence thinking. Perhaps in the act of creation and in giving freedom and relative independence to creation God has chosen to curtail something of the divine sovereignty; and in the act of loving and caring God chooses to be involved in the fortunes of creation, and thus willingly to become vulnerable. Maybe women's experience and female imagery can speak to us of the powerlessness and vulnerability of God.

47) Thirdly, our western culture has often in the past tended to limit a man's role in procreation to the single act of sexual intercourse, whilst the woman's role as mother has been much more dominantly the one who carries, cares for and nurtures, the child after birth. Furthermore, because it is the mother who bears the child, there is a close affinity between mother and child. Maybe female imagery here can enrich our understanding and speaking of God. Creation for God is not the MALE once and for all act. It is more like the carrying, giving birth, feeding, caring and nurture, that we associate with the female. God's mother love gives life and continues to care for it. Creation continues to be dependent upon and cared for by God. Again, if God as Mother gives birth to creation, then a more intimate link between God and creation is suggested than by the image of God who sculpts the world or creates it by Word. The creation is not alien to God because it is God who has brought it to birth. Moreover, the image of God as mother of creation draws attention to the interrelatedness of all life perhaps more powerfully than the Father image, especially when this image is interpreted patriarchally rather than parentally; certainly more powerfully than models of creation based on the work of the craftsman or the decree of Word. These more readily encourage a hierarchical understanding of things. The image of God as Mother giving birth to creation is but one image. It should be placed alongside rather than replace other images. In particular, the continued use of the image of 'creator' preserves the insight that, although related, creator and creation are radically different modes of being. This may not be preserved so readily by the image of 'mother'. The image needs to be balanced with other images. Its theological resources remain, however, considerable.<sup>(15)</sup>

48) A difference was noted earlier between the male/female distinction and the masculine/feminine distinction. It is important that the difference is not forgotten, even though we have not always found it necessary to draw on it. Whilst the gender distinction between male and female is irreducible, the distinction between masculine and feminine derives largely from convention. It is not always obvious at what point the male becomes masculine and the female becomes feminine. In our discussion of the mother image, what is biologically given as that which only females can do slides imperceptibly in the above paragraph into what our culture has often perceived to be the feminine role.

49) In speaking of God in terms of what our culture perceives to be 'feminine' we must be careful lest we project onto God (and thereby perpetuate and legitimize) our cultural stereotypes of the feminine. This is precisely what often happens when the imagery is exclusively male. Whilst in the above paragraphs we have been forced to note that God has often been thought of in terms of our culture's stereotype of the 'masculine' we have for this reason been reluctant to speak in an unqualified way of 'feminine' characteristics. We can use female imagery, and even draw insight from what culture might speak of as 'feminine', without supporting feminine stereotypes. Resistance to the ordination of women sometimes appeals to stereotypes of the male as the one who takes the initiative, and to the female as the one who responds.<sup>(16)</sup> Stereotypes can be cruelly restricting, preventing people from realising that full and equivalent personhood which we possess as male and female. Just as women are able to reason as well as men, so there is no evidence that men are inherently less caring or gentle than women. Sex stereotypes are often highly partisan with regard to a particular sex. Males have often been none too complimentary in their characterizations of the 'feminine'; and feminist thinkers have likewise tended sometimes to characterize those qualities they disapprove of as 'masculine'! The fact remains, stereotypes and cultural expectations have a profound influence on how people think and behave and upon how the young are nurtured. There is no doubt that stereotypes of the ideal male have affected how people think of God. We need to be aware of this, and to ask what insight and what falsehood there is in such stereotypes. Without falling into the danger of accepting and perpetuating female stereotypes we need to ask how the distortion caused by the exclusive or dominant use of male imagery may be corrected by use of the female.

## **MAIN CONCLUSION**

### **(50-59)**

50) Until recently the dominance of male imagery when speaking of God has been unconsciously accepted by most Christians. This usage has, however, three related consequences which should be seriously questioned.

51) The first consequence is that which has just been illustrated. Our understanding of God has been impoverished by exclusive use of male imagery. A second is that an increasing number within the church find that God-talk which is male, but never female, in its imagery is becoming for them more and more alien. Language that may raise no questions for one generation may nonetheless fail to speak, or may speak falsely, to another. When a significant portion of the Christian community no longer feels itself to be addressed by specific terms and phrases, or indeed feels excluded by them, Christian love demands that the matter should receive the urgent attention of the Christian community as a whole.

52) The third consequence is that a theology which has thought of God in terms of paradigm and central images that are MALE has reinforced, if sometimes only unintentionally, the subordination of women. There is truth, if also exaggeration, in Mary Daly's dictum that if God is male, then male is God.<sup>(17)</sup> Of course, Christianity has never claimed that God is male; God is beyond gender. The fact remains, in the traditional picture God is 'Father'. Then 'He' sends the 'Son' who is prefigured by patriarchs and prophets, most of whom were men, and represented in many traditions still by an all male priesthood. The picture can so easily look oppressive to women and be taken as reinforcing their subordination and marginalization. This may still be so even in churches which ordain women on the

same terms as men. Much traditional God-talk can easily be seen as legitimizing and perpetuating the power and the privilege of males. It is after all the case that the church which has used male language about God has also been, and still largely is, patriarchal (i.e. male centred) in its structures and practice. Women have usually been given in the church roles and positions subordinate to men. For those who feel the force of these criticisms things can never be quite the same again.

53) If these three consequences of the dominant use of male imagery in our talk about God are indeed regretted, at least three responses are possible. One is to cease to use male imagery and to use female imagery in its place. In individual prayers this can be appropriate and moving. As a comprehensive programme, however, it merely replaces one type of exclusive language with another. We therefore reject this response. A second response tries to avoid offence by eliminating all imagery that has gender. The resources of gender-neutral imagery are rich indeed. If, however, we eliminate all gender imagery, our language about God is deeply impoverished. Furthermore, in some contexts, although by no means all, imagery that is studiously gender neutral can appear impersonal and cold.

54) It is the third response which this report supports. In this response we continue to use male imagery. Of course we continue to address God as 'Father' – in the Lord's Prayer and at other times. But alongside the male imagery, we use the female. Equal value is given to images from both genders. The male and female images, however, are not just added together in a simple juxtaposition. There is rather a balance and tension between the two – and in this balance and tension we are pointed to God who transcends all human imagination.

55) But what female imagery is appropriate in our speaking of God? The answer must be that female imagery may be appropriate for the same reason that male imagery may be appropriate; if it helps us to speak the truth as we apprehend it; if it draws on those experiences of women which give us insight into the nature of God, and if it expresses the conviction that women and men are alike made in the divine image. The example given earlier of speaking of God's act of creation in terms of God 'bringing creation to birth' leads to the claim that if God is like a father, then it is equally appropriate to speak of God being like a mother. The term 'mother' is indeed not necessarily more positive than the term 'father'. Mothers, like fathers, can be oppressive, domineering, uncaring, and thoughtless. If the image 'father' alienates some, so also may the image 'mother'; every image has its limitations. God is greater than all of them. The point is, however, if we may use the image of God as 'father' – with all its problems and defects – in order to affirm that God is like the ideal parent – then it is also appropriate to speak of God as 'mother'. Objections to the use of the mother image are of the kind that may be made against any image – including that of father. One significant advantage of using both images is that we benefit from the resources of both, and in balancing each other – and being balanced against others – we are reminded that they are but images. If we exclude other metaphors the metaphor of father may become idolatrous, for it comes to be seen as a fully adequate description of God. But God is unlike as well as like our metaphors.<sup>(18)</sup>

56) Women who have themselves experienced motherhood – the giving birth, the nurturing, the delighting in and the self giving love for an infant too young to return that love – sometimes testify that their own experience gives them a very special insight into God's relationship with us. The image of God (and of Christ) as Mother was powerfully exploited by Anselm in the eleventh century, and by Julian

of Norwich some three centuries later. It enabled them to speak movingly of the divine tenderness, nurture and protection. Furthermore, as we owe our being to our earthly mothers, so do we also to our heavenly mother. Again, the willingness of the mother to suffer the pain of labour for her children – and the demands of caring after labour – was used as an image of the willingness of Christ to suffer for us.<sup>(19)</sup>

57) The mother image is not, however, the only female image that may be used. Indeed a concentration upon the mother image may have the effect of perpetuating a culture's expectation that women be first and foremost 'mothers'. This expectation may severely limit a woman's life and aspirations.<sup>(20)</sup> We are aware that female images often derive from family roles. These may of course be illuminating, but we need to explore female imagery which does not unreflectingly reinforce society's stereotypes of women. The biblical image of the midwife is one such female image from outside the family. (Psalm 22, 9) Another female image is used in Brian Wren's poem addressed to 'Dear Sister God'.<sup>(21)</sup> Some find this mode of address speaks powerfully of God's solidarity with, and faithfulness to, us. Admittedly this image may fail to convey much of what we want to say about God, but this is the case with all images. Not every aspect of our understanding of God needs to be conveyed in every image.

58) We must not lose sight of the fact that female and male imagery need to be used together – and not just in a simple juxtaposition. The two sets of images balance and qualify each other – pointing to a God who transcends all human imagination. Furthermore, we are concerned here with more than sexual differences, narrowly defined. This is because many words have 'male' or 'female' associations. The tendency has been to pick up male-associated neutral words and use these to speak of God, whilst omitting female associated words as being unworthy of God. If we now believe that we have been using only some of the appropriate imagery we need to make a radical restart. Changing to inclusive language may trigger new thought by raising awareness. As we are made in the image of God the descriptive, though genderless, words associated with either sex may be used to enrich our understanding of God. Very often these words convey complementary meaning. When used of God they confront us with the paradox of God who is both active and passive, omnipotent and vulnerable, initiating and receptive, aggressive and submissive, forceful and gentle, and so on. Perhaps we best apprehend the mystery of God when we seek divine truth in the heart of the paradox where the two extremes are held in tension. To prefer one extreme, as has often been done, is to tamper with the truth and produce a distorted understanding.

59) In spite of the emphasis often being on the image of power there have always been those who, like Paul in the first two chapters of the first letter to the Corinthians, have wrestled with the paradox of a God whose strength is sometimes displayed in weakness. Isaac Watts asks if thorns ever composed 'so rich a crown'; Charles Wesley speaks of the 'Victim Divine', and of the 'glorious scars'. More recently, Brian Wren notes how we strain to glimpse the powerful image of Christ on the judgment seat, only to find him 'kneeling at our feet'. Alan Gaunt comments: 'and there in helplessness arrayed, God's power was perfectly displayed.' Timothy Dudley-Smith speaks of 'the Lord by right of the lords of earth' coming in a 'child of the stable's secret birth'.<sup>(22)</sup> Maybe in struggling to find the truth in the paradox at the heart of the mystery we will allow ourselves to be brought closer to understanding what God is like.

## PRAYER AND WORSHIP

### (60-66)

60) There is a difference between the language of theology and the language of worship and devotion. Some who are willing to use female imagery when doing theology are nonetheless reluctant to use such images in prayer and worship. They may balk even more at referring to God as 'She' or addressing God as 'Mother'. Metaphors, after all, often appear stronger than similes. It is one thing to say God is 'like' a mother, but another to address God as 'Mother', although the thrust of our argument is that a dual address may often be appropriate – God being addressed as 'Father and Mother'. There may even be in the background the fear of worshipping a 'Goddess' even though this report has insisted that God is beyond gender. The difficulty may be in part intellectual, but also in part emotional. The material of this report relates not only to the intellect but also to deep seated feelings and emotions. It is important that this be recognized and that those who lead worship be sensitive to the feelings of those whom they lead. This is but one aspect of this question which as a church we have only begun to explore – and the way forward must be at a pace which carries people rather than leaves them behind.

61) We have argued there are no theological objections to addressing God as Mother, and many good reasons for doing so. We therefore affirm those who explore the sensitive use of this image in prayer and worship. In no way, however, do we wish to bully those who cannot bring themselves to using such language. Again, some may prefer to explore these possibilities in private devotion before they do so in public worship. Pastoral sensitivity and respect for those who differ from us are obligations on this issue as on others. On the other hand our unreflecting feelings should not be allowed a veto against change when we believe that change is called for by the Spirit of God leading the church into richer understanding. Furthermore, part of Christian discipleship involves the willingness to subject our feelings as well as our ideas to critical scrutiny.

62) An appendix is added to this report which includes examples of prayers using female imagery. It is hoped that this appendix shows that the arguments of this report may bear fruit in prayers which move people and which they feel able to pray. Furthermore, although the main concern of this report is our language and imagery about God, it is important to remember that female imagery may be used throughout the language of theology and devotion – thus drawing upon women's experience, reminding us of the contribution of women to our biblical and Christian tradition, and expressing our belief in our fundamental equality as being together the people of God.

63) The public worship of Methodism draws from two sources. First from the authorized liturgy in *The Methodist Service Book*, and, secondly, from the wider tradition of devotion which may feed extempore prayer or which may yield prayers selected by the leader of worship for use. The above paragraphs (numbers 60-61) address more this second source. But what about the authorized liturgy of the church? Are we to recommend that the revision of our service book should include examples of female imagery when addressing God? We recommend that those who revise our authorized liturgies should take into account the argument of this report, and point to the appendix which illustrates how a sensitive use of female alongside male imagery may enrich our devotion. When a new service book is published the church will have to decide what is an appropriate balance of male and female imagery; and what are appropriate examples of each. It is worth noting that in

*Hymns & Psalms* God is spoken of as acting 'like a mother'.<sup>(23)</sup> Furthermore, the experience of other churches may guide us. For example God is addressed as 'Father and Mother of us all' in a paraphrase of the Lord's Prayer by J. Cotter and is printed in the official prayer book of the Anglican Church in New Zealand.<sup>(24)</sup>

64) A particular difficulty is found with the pronoun when applied to God. In the English language there are only three pronouns: He, She and It. We cannot refer to God as 'it' because we believe God is personal. Unless we invent a pronoun that is both PERSONAL and GENDER NEUTRAL we are bound to refer to God as either 'He' or 'She'. English does not have the facility enjoyed by some languages (e.g. Bantu) of a pronoun that is both personal and gender neutral. The male pronoun has been used in the past when speaking of God but it must be said with emphasis that in referring to God as 'He' Christians have almost invariably intended to affirm the personality and NOT the maleness of God. But if the personality of God is affirmed by referring to God as 'He' it may just as well be affirmed by referring to God as 'She'. We see, therefore, no objection to referring to God sometimes as 'He' and sometimes as 'She'. Indeed this has a certain appropriateness because the use of both pronouns reminds us that God is beyond male and female and even though our experience of being male or female, made as we are in the image of God, gives us some insight into God's nature.

65) Some, however, may feel this dual usage involves inconsistency and may consequently propose that the pronoun be used less. Instead of referring to 'Him' or 'Her' the name 'God' will be used. Given the limitations of our language it is difficult to see any ideal solution to this dilemma; but the least satisfactory solution is the continued use of the male pronoun alone. One possible way forward is that implied by paragraph 28 above – i.e. that of referring to the Spirit as 'She', a usage that has precedent in our tradition. In this report no pronoun has been used to refer to God, except in quotations – the name of 'God' always being used instead. This, however, is offered simply as an exercise by way of interest; not as a norm for all writing about God. It needs also to be remembered that the avoidance of the pronoun may have the unfortunate effect of reducing emphasis on the personality of God. This question, like many raised in this report, needs to be debated thoroughly, and experimentation needs to be undertaken.

66) We should of course use the gender pronoun 'he' when referring to Jesus Christ since Christ was a man. We are unconvinced, however, by those who maintain that the MALENESS of Christ has theological significance – for example, for our understandings of priesthood and of the nature of authority within the Christian community. It is the full and perfect HUMANITY of Christ that is significant, and we believe that language about Christ should give emphasis to this, rather than to his maleness. The New Testament notion of Christ as the 'Last Adam' reinforces this claim. The maleness of Jesus is not a statement of the priority of the male in the will and purpose of God. It is important, however, to recognize how Christ, a male, behaved; challenging some current stereotypes of, and thus redefining, maleness and power.

## TWO FURTHER ISSUES

(67-70)

### a) The Doctrine of the Trinity

67) Reference has already been made to the doctrine of the Trinity, and to the use of Trinitarian language. This issue needs some further attention. There are a number of different traditions of thought concerning the doctrine of the Trinity. One claims that within one God there are three distinct although equal 'persons'. Another fears that this approach verges on 'tritheism' – that is the belief in three Gods. It may also object that it fails to establish what it means to claim God is both one and yet also three 'persons'. It therefore offers as an alternative understanding of the doctrine the claim that the one God is manifested in three basic ways – as creator, as redeemer in Christ, and as present and active in the world. Others are unhappy with this kind of threefold division and speak simply of the one God as Spirit – creating, redeeming, sustaining, acting, judging, forgiving, sanctifying, etc. They may nonetheless acknowledge that Trinitarian theology has in the past preserved many important insights; for example that it is GOD (and not some distant emanation or representative) who is in Christ, and present and active among us. It bears further witness to the belief that the God who is creator, the God who is present in Jesus, and the God who is active in the world, are one and the same God.

68) Our approach to the doctrine of the Trinity will affect the language we use when speaking of the Trinity. Those who support the first kind of approach are likely to be more firmly tied to the traditional language than those who adopt another. Some Christians believe strongly that in, for example, the Baptismal formula – the traditional Trinitarian reference should be preserved. We have no wish to resist this insistence. Just as we have argued that we should listen to those who are offended by the use of 'exclusive' language, so we believe we should listen to those for whom traditional Trinitarian language is very precious. The whole thrust of this report is in favour of a plurality of images which as a complex point to the richness of God. Within this plurality of images the traditional Trinitarian formula must have a place. Indeed, implicit in the argument of this report is the claim that traditional Trinitarian theology may accommodate the imagery of Mother as well as Father when speaking of the first person; and there is also no reason why female imagery may not be used when speaking of the third – as it has been in the past.<sup>(25)</sup> Furthermore, alongside the preservation of traditional language about the Trinity we see no objection to the use of complementary images. As we have argued, 'Father' is not God's only appropriate 'name'. Thus God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, may be spoken of ALSO as Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. We must, however, be aware of the dangers that attend such language. It might be taken as failing to express the insight that the work of each 'person' of the Trinity is at the same time the work of the one God. We need also to be wary of appearing to restrict the activity of God by implying it is summed up in three simple descriptions. Why, for example, should the Holy Spirit be spoken of as 'sustainer' rather than as, say, 'disturber', 'enabler', 'sanctifier' or in some other way?

69) Most traditions of Trinitarian theology point to the profound mystery and otherness of God's being. The more this is recognized the more it should also be recognized that the human male is but one of a number of aspects of God's creation in terms of which God may be imaged. Trinitarian doctrines, then, contain, if only implicitly, a critique of the exclusive use of male imagery in God-talk. It may further be noted that some have argued that the doctrine of the Trinity prompts a

rejection of hierarchical (and hence patriarchal) ordering of human society since if human society is to be modelled upon the life of the Trinity it should be equalitarian and cooperative rather than authoritarian and hierarchical – reflecting the inner life of the Trinity which is a loving sharing of co-equal persons.<sup>(26)</sup>

#### **b) Mary**

70) It is sometimes argued that devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary provides a feminine focus in the Christian faith, thus absolving us of the need to use female imagery when talking about God. The place, however, of a feminine focus in devotion to Mary is no reason for denying female imagery has a proper place also in our speaking about God. On the contrary, if female imagery finds its place in devotion to Mary, but not in our language about God, the subordination of women to men is simply reinforced since the woman Mary is subordinate to God, who, without being male, is spoken of only in male terms. Furthermore, the arguments we have advanced in favour of using female imagery when thinking and speaking of God are not met when such imagery is found only in talk about Mary. The fundamental issue is not what Mary has been called but rather what language is appropriate when we speak of God.

### **POSTSCRIPT**

#### **(71-72)**

71) There are both men and women who oppose the use of inclusive language and of female imagery when speaking of God. There are also both men and women who deny the issue is of any consequence. We ask such men if they are not thereby contributing to the perpetuation of male dominance over women – a dominance which our language both expresses and reinforces. It is, after all, largely men who benefit from speaking of God in exclusively male terms. God-talk in terms of images that are largely male helps to legitimize and maintain male dominance in society, and the consequent devaluing of women. Why, it may be asked, should Christians be complacent about hearing constantly of the fatherly, but never of the motherly, love of God? Likewise, we ask women who adopt a similar attitude to consider if they do not thereby acquiesce in the devaluing and subordination of their own sex. The position of this report is that patriarchy (i.e. 'male centred' society) is not the will and the gift of God – as some traditions of theology affirm – but a deep sin of our own creating.

72) We are only at the beginning of our quest into what the issues raised in this report might mean for our understanding and speaking of God, and we are only at the beginning of discovering the implications of the fact that Christian theology has been largely the product of MALES. We need both female and male images and insights if we are to speak of the divine wholeness, and in order to express our conviction that women and men are made equal, to live for one another in equality and in a mutual sharing, as together made in the image of God.

### **APPENDIX**

We give below examples of prayers and meditations which we hope will move people and which they will feel able to use. Some employ female imagery in speaking of God and addressing God. Others give an emphasis to what some sections of our culture may speak of as 'feminine' qualities. Others draw attention

to the contribution of women to our religious heritage. It will be noted that by no means all come from our present century.

### 1. EXAMPLES FROM CONTEMPORARY PRAYERS.

‘The blessing of the God of Sarah and Hagar,  
as of Abraham,  
the blessing of the son,  
born of the woman Mary,  
and the blessing of the Holy Spirit  
who broods over us all as a mother her children,  
be with you all.’<sup>(27)</sup>

‘Eternal Spirit,  
Life-giver, pain-bearer, love-maker,  
Source of all that is and shall be,  
Father and Mother of us all,  
Loving God in whom is heaven . . .’<sup>(28)</sup>

‘Holy Spirit,  
mighty wind of God,  
inhabit our darkness  
brood over our abyss  
and speak to our chaos;  
that we may breathe with your life  
and share your creation  
in the power of Jesus Christ. Amen.’<sup>(29)</sup>

O God the source of all insight,  
whose coming was revealed to the nations  
not among men of power  
but on a woman’s lap;  
give us grace to seek you  
where you may be found,  
that the wisdom of this world may be humbled  
and discover your unexpected joy,  
through Jesus Christ. Amen.’<sup>(30)</sup>

God our mother,  
you hold our life within you;  
nourish us at your breast,  
and teach us to walk alone.  
Help us to receive your tenderness  
and to respond to your challenge  
that others may draw life from us,  
in your name, Amen.’<sup>(31)</sup>

'Christ, whose bitter agony  
was watched from afar by women,  
enable us to follow the example  
of their persistent love;  
that, being steadfast in the face of horror,  
we may also know the place of resurrection,  
in your name, Amen.' <sup>(32)</sup>

'O God, the power of the powerless,  
you have chosen as your witness  
those whose voice is not heard.  
Grant that, as women first announced  
the resurrection  
though they were not believed  
we too may have courage  
to persist in proclaiming your word,  
in the power of Jesus Christ, Amen.' <sup>(33)</sup>

'Christ our true mother,  
you carried us within you,  
laboured with us,  
and brought us forth to bliss.  
Enclose us in your care,  
that in stumbling we may not fall,  
nor be overcome by evil,  
but know that all shall be well.' <sup>(34)</sup>

'O God our deliverer,  
you cast down the mighty,  
and lift up those of no account;  
as Elizabeth and Mary embraced with songs of liberation,  
so may we also be pregnant with your spirit,  
and affirm one another in hope for the world,  
through Jesus Christ. Amen' <sup>(35)</sup>

'In the beginning was God  
In the beginning, the source of all that is  
In the beginning, God yearning  
God, moaning  
God, labouring  
God, giving birth  
God, rejoicing  
and God loving what she had made  
And God said: "It is good"  
Then God, knowing that all that is good is shared  
held the earth tenderly in her arms  
God yearning for relationship  
God longed to share the good earth  
And humanity was born in the yearning of God

We were born to share the earth . . .  
God said, You are my people  
My friends,  
My lovers,  
My sisters,  
And brothers . . .’ <sup>(36)</sup>

‘Eternal God, as you created  
humankind in your image, women and men, male and  
female, renew us in that image;  
God the Holy Spirit, by your strength and love comfort us  
as those whom a mother comforts;  
Lord Jesus Christ, by your death and resurrection, give us  
the joy of those for whom pain and suffering become,  
in hope, the fruitful agony of travail;  
God, the Holy Trinity, grant that we may together enter  
into new life, your promised rest of achievement and  
fulfilment – world without end.’ <sup>(37)</sup>

‘Tender God, touch us.  
Be touched by us;  
make us lovers of humanity,  
compassionate friends of all creation.  
Gracious God, hear us into speech;  
speak us into acting;  
and through us recreate the world. Amen.’ <sup>(38)</sup>

‘O living God, we pray for your holy people, the church,  
We ask that every member may be freed  
to serve you in truth and grace.  
We remember our foremothers. We remember all women who  
have recognised that to be a person of faith is to respond  
in action,  
We give thanks:  
For Miriam, poetess of the Exodus, leader through the wilderness;  
For Deborah, a mother and judge in Israel;  
For Rachel, traveller with Jacob;  
For the woman who bathed Jesus’ feet with her tears;  
For Mary Magdalene, first apostle of the Resurrection.’ <sup>(39)</sup>

‘God, you are Love, and reveal yourself through loving relationships,  
You make women and men in your own image  
and invite them to bear your likeness.  
In motherly love you bring us to birth,  
nourishing and sustaining us before we comprehend.  
So you teach us the depth and strength of love.  
From the protection of fatherly love  
You teach us to use the amazing gift of life,  
and we learn that power is for caring.  
In sisters and brothers you are beside us  
in all our explorations.

As dearest friend you are our companion through laughter and tears.  
In our little ones you reveal your vulnerability.  
You are there in the face of the stranger  
outcast by our indifference and rejection.  
You seek us as lover asking our answering love.  
You are wounded to death at our estrangement.  
When we return you meet us with outstretched arms.  
These risks you take for love.  
Accept our wonder.  
Forgive our slowness to understand.  
Deepen our longing to be at home with you.’<sup>(40)</sup>

## 2. EXAMPLES FROM HISTORY

‘And you, Jesus, are you not also a mother?  
Are you not the mother who like a hen,  
gathers her chickens under her wings?  
Truly, Lord, you are a mother;  
for both they who labour  
and they who are brought forth  
are accepted by you.’  
(St. Anselm)<sup>(41)</sup>

‘And you, my soul, dead in yourself,  
run under the wings of Jesus your mother  
and lament your griefs under his feathers.  
Ask that your wounds may be healed  
and that comforted, you may live again.’  
(St. Anselm)<sup>(42)</sup>

And Thou Jesus, sweet Lord, art thou not also a mother?  
Truly thou art a mother, the mother of all mothers,  
who tamed death in thy desire to give life to thy children.’  
(St. Anselm)<sup>(43)</sup>

‘So when he made us God almighty was our kindly father,  
and God all-wise our kindly mother,  
and the Holy Spirit their love and goodness; all one God,  
one Lord,  
. . . By the skill and wisdom of the Second Person  
we are sustained, restored, and saved . . . for he is our  
mother, brother and saviour.’  
(Julian of Norwich)<sup>(44)</sup>

‘Thus in our Father, God almighty, we have our being. In our merciful Mother  
we have reformation and renewal . . . Our essence is in our Father, God  
almighty, and in our Mother, God all-wise, and in our Lord the Holy Spirit,  
God all good.’  
(Julian of Norwich)<sup>(45)</sup>

‘So Jesus Christ who sets good against evil is our real Mother. We owe our being to him – and this is the essence of motherhood! – and all the delightful, loving protection which ever follows. God is really our Mother as he is our Father. He showed this throughout, and particularly when he said . . .  
 “It is I who am the strength and goodness of Fatherhood; I who am the wisdom of Motherhood; I who am light and grace and blessed love; I who am Trinity; I who am unity; I who am the sovereign goodness of every single thing; I who enable you to love.”  
 (Julian of Norwich)<sup>(46)</sup>

‘The human mother will suckle her child with her own milk, but our beloved mother Jesus, feeds us with himself.’  
 (Julian of Norwich)<sup>(47)</sup>

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## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

It is recommended that . . .

- 1) the use of 'inclusive language' and the exploration of female imagery in our speaking of God should be strongly encouraged in order that:
  - we seek a more balanced understanding of God, and manner of speaking of God, in whose image both male and female are made.
  - we avoid encouraging by our language the idea that the male is the norm of the human,
  - we avoid the marginalization of women through the use of 'exclusive' language and the dominant use of male imagery,
- 2) preachers and leaders of worship should remember how language helps to mould our thinking and attitudes and that we should, therefore, seek to avoid the use of 'exclusive' language which reinforces ideas and attitudes incompatible with Christian belief in the equal standing of women and men,
- 3) the use of inclusive language should be strongly encouraged in all official Methodist publications, and that the practice of using such language in all new Standing Orders should be continued, so that eventually S.O. 008(ii) and 008(iii) become redundant,

- 4) ways should be explored of raising awareness of the issues discussed in this report throughout the church – e.g. through questions on official agendas, through ‘language workshops’, etc.

#### **RESOLUTION**

The Conference adopts the report and commends it for study.

*(Agenda 1992, pp.80-107)*