

# Common Threads

*A newsletter from the National Lutheran Choir's  
Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee*

**January 2024**

## Gendered Language



### *Gendered Language for God and the People of God*

Dr. Jennaya Robison

She/her

*NLC Artistic Director*

Several years ago I had the pleasure of serving as a guest clinician at First Plymouth United Church of Christ in Lincoln, Nebraska. I spent a Saturday joyfully making music with the choir and interacting with the members of the music ministry who brilliantly displayed a welcoming community of music and faith. My dear friend, Tom Trenney, is the Minister of Music at the church and he invited me to be part of a “choir tuneup” and to serve as guest conductor and soloist in worship the next day. When I arrived at worship on Sunday, I noticed a beautifully crafted statement of inclusion that changed the heart of this life-long church goer.

The statement printed in the bulletin beautifully explained the use and non-use of gendered language for God and the people of God. Having served churches for over twenty years, I have seen my share of different philosophies regarding gendered language. Some, to be completely honest, left me feeling a little flat. As a woman, I do feel a little left out at times when the people of God are referred to as “men.” As a musician, there are vocal and musical reasons behind keeping language as it was originally composed. For instance, Handel’s “Hallelujah Chorus”: “....and He shall reign for ever and ever. “He” rings in the voice a little differently than “God” does.

In the past ten years, I’ve started to think more and more about how I perceive God in my imagination. I have to admit, I have an image of God that has been one I created in my mind for as long as I can remember: male, white, long beard, somewhat cinematic and “Ten Commandment”-esque. When a pastor of mine started to use “she” in reference to the Holy Spirit, I bristled. That image did not fit my image of God. I began to ask myself why I felt so strongly and I wondered if it was me who was limiting God.

As a parent, I marvel at the fact that my children (to whom I feel so closely attuned) came into this world their own wonderfully individual beings. No matter how well I knew their likes and dislikes, their mannerisms, how I knew when they were hungry or tired - they were not individual expressions of me; rather, they are their own unique beings. As my children have grown older, I look with wonder at who they have become. I think that this must be how God looks at all of us. We are expressions of God and the manifestation of God’s love and presence here on earth. As a mother to three children, all of whom express different gender identities, I realize that expressing God solely as male limited how I believe God resides in each one of us. It was *my* concept and *my* language for God that put boundaries on God.

As the new Artistic Director of the National Lutheran Choir, I was brought face to face with gendered language for God and the people of God in our very first rehearsals. There are situations where the language could very easily be changed - and some where language is not easily changed. Historical significance and tradition may take precedence over changing language (as it may take away from the music or necessitate a change in how the music was written.) Changing language may be impossible as a piece of music and the text is under copyright. I brought an idea to the staff, singers, and our DEI Committee: can we put a statement in our programs to reflect the thought process behind our attempts to change or not to change the language for God and the people of God? In essence, can we give our audience and NLC members a statement that addresses these issues?

For our public facing programs and our website, the National Lutheran Choir has adopted the following statement to address the issues of gendered language for God and the people of God. Does this statement fix everything? No. Will it make some bristle and some say that it is not enough? Yes - and we recognize that this is a fluid and ever-changing dialogue for the community of God. It is with great humility that the NLC staff and singers offer the following statement:

*The National Lutheran choir recognizes that God's existence cannot be limited to any one gender. Predominately masculine imagery and language for God has marginalized members of our community, especially women and members of the LGBTQIA+ community. When possible, NLC strives to use inclusive language when referring to God and humanity. There are times when musical and poetic material has not been changed to preserve the intentions of the composer and/or poet or because copyright laws prohibit changes. The spirit in which we offer our musical gifts is one of inclusivity for all humanity.*



## *A perspective on the NLC Statement on Gendered Language*

Abs Trewin  
They/them  
NLC Alto 2

I grew up in the Lutheran church. My church choir directors fostered my love for music, and they helped me find my place in the community. Early in the NLC's 2023-24 season, I stood in front of our choir and told them about how I have found sacredness in my identity. I leaned into scripture and theology: as Psalm 139 says "...[God] created my inmost being; [God] knit me together in my mother's womb; I praise [God] because I am fearfully and wonderfully made." I have never questioned God's profound love for me and all of God's people. As a queer and non-binary individual, this is incredibly rare.

Several friends and family members of mine have experienced religious trauma because of their LGBTQ identity. This has manifested in unkind words from fellow churchgoers, limited participation imposed by clergy, and the desire to "pray the gay away" from parents of children being sent to summer camp.

This is why I affirm NLC's commitment to gender-inclusive language for God and for people. People from all gender identities deserve to come as they are to sing in community. This means addressing groups of people in rehearsal using inclusive language. For example, I am someone who sings in the treble range. Addressing treble singers as "women" excludes the soprano and altos singing those parts who are not women. Also, I have female friends who sing tenor, and they would be excluded if the tenors and basses were only referred to as "men." NLC has welcomed me with open arms, and I have felt that same comfort and love in this group as I did when I was a child singing in my church choir. I am honored to be part of NLC's journey of inclusivity, and I am excited to see how our mission unfolds as we share it with our audiences.



## *Reflections*

Pr. Joseph Crippen

He/him

*NLC Tenor 2*

There is deep and abiding mystery about the nature of God from the beginning of Scripture. In Genesis 1, God creates humanity, saying, "Let us create humankind in our own image." In our own image! The generic word for God in Hebrew is *Elohim*, which is a plural noun. We who are Christian believe that the Holy God of all time and space is known to us as Triune: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, yet three Persons. The Hebrew people didn't have that concept, and yet they had a fluid understanding of God's singularity and plurality.

It is that mystery that opens us up to deeper, richer understandings not only of God but of humanity itself. If God is Trinity, then the Triune God has no specific gender, and yet encompasses all genders, since we are made in God's image.

Yet the way we have spoken of God for a long time in English is often strictly male, which is not only untrue of God's reality as we know it from Scripture, but also is a construct that inhibits many of God's beloved children from seeing themselves as the image of God. Opening up our language to describe the God the Bible actually portrays is a blessing to all, and helps all to find themselves included in God's embrace in ways that exclusive male language for God does not.

A few years ago I started using the pronoun "she" when reading Scripture referring to the Holy Spirit, because in Hebrew, Spirit is a feminine noun and in Greek it's neuter (not masculine). So it was arbitrary, and even contrary, to translate "he" for pronouns referring to the Spirit of God. When I first read a Gospel reading that way, a young woman I know well came up to me in tears after worship. She said for the first time in her life she could see herself included in God's image. That's the prize. That's the hope. That's what we want to do as people overwhelmed by the love of God: make it possible for as many as possible to know that love.

The same is true for how we speak of each other. Some of our siblings experience themselves in other ways than simply male or female, and it is simply kind thoughtfulness that inspires us to call all people by the way they see themselves, and to use words like pronouns that honor how each person might describe themselves. (Here's an example: My name is Joseph, and my mother didn't like nicknames. Everyone who knows me and loves me calls me Joseph, and I really don't like being called Joe. Even if someone thinks they're being friendly doing it, it's not.)

The National Lutheran Choir, whose making of beautiful music draws people into the love and life of God, simply wants to use language for God and for human beings that makes that possible - language that includes all who hear us, as much as we possibly can. Language that is thoughtful and kind. Our gift of music to others is too important to cause people to recoil from it due to language that is harmful or exclusive. And frankly, as a pastor I can say Jesus would want us to do this. After all, he gave one commandment over all, to love each other. Loving language is a part of that blessing and gift.

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