SUGGESTIONS FOR USING NON-DISCRIMINATORY LANGUAGE

Fuller Theological Seminary

Introduction

This guide was developed by Fran Hiebert, Director for the Office of Women's Concerns, on behalf of the Fuller Community in 1984. It is reprinted by permission.

The Joint Faculty of Fuller Theological Seminary has adopted a statement recommending the use of non-discriminatory language by all members of the Seminary community. This is consistent with the clear commitment of the Seminary to the full equality of women and men and to the training of women as equal partners with men for all areas of Christian ministry.

It is recognized by the faculty that the very structure of the English language causes problems to those who wish to be non-sexist in their communication. These problems are rather deeply rooted in the intricate interplay between language and culture. As culture changes, however, it is possible for language to change and to develop into a structure that is more consistent with new perceptions and paradigms. For example, because it is no longer assumed that the male alone is the true human ideal, it was deemed necessary by the faculty to drop the usage of "man" and "mankind" as generic terms and to use words like "human" and "humankind" in the Fuller Statement of Faith.

Various members of the faculty and student body have made significant contributions to the understanding of the sexism inherent in the traditional use of the English language. In order to build on their efforts and in response to the request of the faculty, the Office for Women's Concerns has prepared this booklet as an aid to the use of non-discriminatory language. These suggestions have been taken in part from A Guide for Women in Seminary, produced by the Task Force on Women in Theological Education of the National Council of Churches; from All May Be One, prepared by the Task Force on Women, Presbytery of the Twin Cities Area; and from Guidelines for Equal Treatment of the Sexes in McGraw-Hill Book Company Publications.

Generic Usage

There are many substitutes which may be used in the generic sense for the words "man," "mankind," and other words that now have an exclusively male connotation. Among these are: humanity, humankind, human beings, humans, persons, people, all, and everyone.

THE TROUBLESOME PRONOUNS

The English language lacks an inclusive third-person singular pronoun that signifies either male or female except for the more formal "one." The following are suggestions about solving pronoun problems using an example the phrase, "A man shows his faith in God by..."

1. Replace the masculine pronoun with "one/one's" (formal), "you/yours" (informal), "he or she/her's or his" "I/my."

   One shows his faith...
   You show your faith...
   A person shows his or her faith...

   A person shows their faith... (this is for the "bolder" ones as it is as yet grammatically incorrect to combine third-person singular and plural. General usage of this, however, is increasing.)

   I show my faith...

2. Recast into the plural.

   People show their faith...
   We show our faith...

3. Recast into the passive voice.

   Faith in God is shown by...

4. Rewrite the sentence to eliminate an unnecessary pronoun.

   Change: A person shows his faith in God by...
   to: How do people demonstrate their faith...

   Change: The average minister reads his Bible daily.
   to: The average minister reads the Bible daily.

   Change: The average American drinks his coffee black.
   to: The average American drinks black coffee.

Other possibilities for solving the pronoun problem are:

Alternating male and female expressions and examples.

Change: We criticize people saying, "he's too forceful," or "he's too timid."

   to: We criticize people saying, "he's too forceful," or "she's too timid."

Choosing actual or hypothetical people in order to illustrate a point.

Change: An effective minister will use dramatic technique to communicate his message.

   to: Mary Smith uses dramatic technique to communicate her message which makes her a more effective minister than Jane Jones.

NOUNS WITH NUANCES

Nouns that refer to women or men but include the word "man" or "men" may be replaced with neutral terms. It should never be assumed, of course, that any occupation or group is composed only of men. The following list includes some nouns with male gender connotation and suggests how they may be replaced.

instead of chairman:
   the chair, head, presiding officer, leader, moderator, chairperson, or the committee chair by...
   (do not use chairperson in combination with a proper name; it is correct to say chairman Jim Jones or chairwoman Sue Smith)

Instead of clergyman-men:
   clergy, minister, elder, pastor, clergywomen and men

instead of layman-men:
   laity, layperson, laypeople, member of the congregation, lay Christian

instead of congressman:
   member of congress, senator, representative, delegate

instead of salesman:
   salesperson, clerk, sales representative

instead of mailman:
   mail carrier
Instead of brothers in Christ:
brothers and sisters, Christians, friends
Instead of brotherhood, fraternity:
union, unity, community, company, family, (fellowship is acceptable to most people because it no longer strictly connotes male gender)
Instead of airline hostess:
flight attendant
Instead of waitress/actress:
waiter/actor
Instead of repairman:
someone to repair the... or, specifically, plumber, electrician, etc.

**Forms of Identification and Address**

1. Avoid using "woman" as an adjective before a title, as in "woman minister" or "woman teacher" unless there is specific intention to point to sex rather than to role. For instance, it is not necessary to say "A woman board member raised the issue of inadequate student financial aid." The issue raised has nothing to do with the fact that a woman raised it. On the other hand, however, there are times when it is perfectly legitimate to use "woman" as an adjective if the intention is to designate gender. For example, a questionnaire meant only for students who are women may be titled, "Questionnaire of Women Seminarians."

2. When designating men and women in the same sentence, parallel terms should be used so that women are not put into an inferior or dependent position. For instance, a man should not be identified by sex and the woman by role. The following are examples of the proper balancing of certain designations for women and men:

   "the men and women" or "the ladies and the gentlemen" (not "the men and the ladies")
   husband and wife (not man and wife)

3. Many women find the term "lady" or "girl" condescending when used as a substitute for "woman."

4. Women want to be identified by their own names, not by their roles unless there is a specific reason for it. This is important in all kinds of lists, registries, and directories. A woman's first name should be as immediately available as her husband's. "Charles and Isabel Trevor" is preferable to "Mr. and Mrs. Charles Trevor." Reference to a woman's marital status should be avoided except when it is specifically in question. When using the terms "Ms.", "Mrs.", or "Miss", the form that the particular woman in question prefers should be used.

5. Illegibility should not always picture girls as playing with dolls or boys as hating English and excelling in math. Men should not always be the breadwinners, scientists, ministers, or executives. Women should not always be secretaries, mothers, nurses, or "good Samaritans." This is not to say that stereotypes should be reversed since they do have some basis in fact. The goal is to provide a wide variety of options and role models to encourage wide participation in all activities rather than to have choices limited by sex-linked stereotypes.

6. It is unfortunate that women are often characterized only according to two assets: their appearance and their success as wives/mothers. References to a woman's appearance, charm, or intuition should be avoided if they are not relevant to the discussion. In illustrations, care should be taken that not only men are portrayed as active and women described only by their personal assets. For example:

   Change: Our minister, Ann Larsen, is a beautiful blonde, and her husband is a brilliant scientist at JPL.
   to: The Larsens are an attractive couple; or, Ann Larsen is the pastor of our church and Bill is a scientist at JPL.

7. Women feel demeaned by the use of feminine pronouns to refer to neuter nouns. For instance, the word church is a neuter, collective term. As an institution and community of Christians, it has no gender. Therefore, it is only appropriate to refer to the church as "she" or "her" in the very specific metaphor of the church as the bride of Christ. Another example would be that the proper pronoun for a ship is "it" rather than "she."

**In Conclusion**

For most Christians, differentiation between the sexes is understood as being rooted in God's creative act. Human traits, however, are shared by both sexes and what is praised in one should be praised in the other. These shared traits are present to varying degrees and at various times in both women and men.

The suggestions in this booklet are only a beginning to what needs to be accomplished to make the use of language reflect a commitment to the full equality of women and men.

**Joint Faculty Statement**

As members of the Joint Faculty of Fuller Theological Seminary, we are committed to the use of non-discriminatory language in all areas of the community's life. We recognize that many women and men no longer find "man," "men," and "mankind" acceptable as generic terms. We understand that such exclusive language, though once normative in our speaking and writing, now tends increasingly to alienate a substantial group of people. We wish to challenge patterns of language that may be doing harm even when harm is inflicted unconsciously and without intention. As Christians desiring to support human equality, we intend to avoid exclusive language which might express or encourage discrimination within the church or society. We pledge ourselves as faculty and encourage students, staff members, and administrators to use language which includes women and men in all our teaching, writing, witness, and worship.