

Inclusive Language Inside the  
Christian Community

Senior Thesis

By

Hope Ariel Brown

Department of Women Studies

University of Washington

June 2004

Advisor: Kathleen D. Noble, Ph.D

For my mom, Charlotte Joy Lindberg  
with love and gratitude

## **Acknowledgements**

I have crossed paths with numerous individuals during the course of this project, all of whom I would like to recognize with joy and appreciation. First and foremost I must thank my inspiration for this project: my mom. This thesis would not have been created without countless discussions with my mom, whose vast knowledge, spiritual energy, love and devotion allowed me to write to the best of my potential. Thank you to each of the women interviewed: Sally Balmer, Sister Claudette Conrad, Mary-Evelyn Long, Deborah Sunoo, and Caryl Menkhus. I would also like to recognize my advisor Kate Noble, whose calm manner and encouraging words allowed me to organize my thoughts with both clarity and wild energy. Thank you to Angela Ginorio for guiding my first creative efforts, Kevin Mihata for a quick introduction to content analysis and qualitative methods, Prairie for her brilliant editing skills and emotional support, Kima for being herself and for centering me, Jannelle for taking me on walks, Peter for his love, all friends and family who listened with attentive and supportive ears, and that Divine energy, which pulses its way through all written words.

## Table of Contents

I.	Introduction.....	5
II.	Literature Review.....	9
III.	Research Questions.....	18
IV.	Methods.....	20
V.	Results.....	22
VI.	Discussion.....	46
VII.	Limitations.....	49
VIII.	Conclusion.....	50
IX.	References.....	52
X.	Appendices.....	54

## **Introduction**

Human beings, living together in this vast and growing world, are tightly interconnected. We all reflect deeply on life. We want to know what we are doing here, we want to know if we are making the right choices, and we seek guidance as to how to best live out our ephemeral existence on this earth. It is through this process of reflection and the seeking of new awareness that many people turn to religion and spirituality. A recent Gallup poll of 1,004 adults reports that 61 percent of Americans agree that "religion can answer all or most of today's problems" (Harper, 2004).

The world's religions are a strong and powerful force in the lives of most individuals today, and have succeeded in reaching countless numbers of people through holy books, prayers, songs, and the voices of devoted religious leaders. The influence of religion on the lives of all people is an important phenomenon to study. As a young, white, American woman who identifies as a feminist, I would like to present my own perspective of the religion that has most influenced me throughout my 22 years of existence. It is with hope of breeching the strong, patriarchal language and teachings of the Christian religion that I present my own religious background and growing spiritual awareness. My religious background may be seen as a starting point through which to view the progressive ideas of a feminist Christian theology that seeks to reform the language and divine imaging methods used inside the Christian church. For the purpose of this thesis, I define Christianity as any religion whose primary spiritual guidance comes from the teachings of Jesus Christ.

I have many memories of my first introductions to religion and spirituality. When I was very young, my mom took my two sisters and me to a conservative Lutheran

church. Some of my earliest images of God include the grandfatherly image of “Pastor Rod,” and a huge painting that hung in the church meeting hall of a bearded, white Jesus with large hands stretched far, reaching out as if to gather and protect all of the furry, white sheep that flocked just under his soft gaze. It was at this Lutheran church that I watched my mom have countless conversations with church leaders and members of the congregation concerning the sexist language used, without exception, inside the church liturgy. I did not understand the anger that my mom expressed at the conservative Lutheran church until many years later, when I began my own spiritual journey of questioning and seeking new awareness.

It is within this journey that I began to question some common images of God (i.e. white, male images). Who had instilled these images in my mind? Was it okay to challenge the widespread beliefs and images found in fundamental Christianity? Like many women and emerging feminist sects of Christian individuals, I found that a solely male image of God had been harmful to my spiritual growth. While I gained comfort from the traditions of my Lutheran roots, I was outgrowing many of the basic teachings of my conservative religion. My questions were not welcome in the church, and I experienced annoyance and anger at the constant and dominating use of male language to define God.

Through countless conversations with my mom, who today remains the most influential feminist Christian theologian in my life, I began to create a new framework through which to view my relationship with God. Inside this framework, I am allowed to have a deep connection to a God that I can relate to and grow with. This God is not solely

white and male, but inclusive of all sexes, races, classes and cultures of people, and ultimately a mystery.

Today, women can find numerous books (Borysenko, 1999; Lynn Reilly, 1995; Harris, 1989), which serve as guides for individuals whose spiritual growth has either been harmed, or blocked by traditional images of a dominant, judgmental, and wrath-seeking male God. These books focus on recognition of religious history and beliefs, and the shedding of negative images and teachings in order to develop a new spiritual awareness and authentic meaning of self in relation to God.

Although today I do not identify as a Christian, I recognize that my historical roots are dug deeply into the foundations of a Christian theology, as well as a feminist theology. It is possible that someday these two theologies will intertwine on a widespread level. Although feminist theology is growing and has reached some Christian denominations, it has not yet gained widespread or positive attention within mainstream Christianity.

One important component of feminist theology, and the area in which I have chosen to focus my energy, is inclusive language. There exist numerous differing opinions on how best to define “inclusive” within the context of Christianity. For simplicity’s sake, I will now define inclusive language as the equivalent usage of both male and female terms and images to define and talk about God, or gender-neutral language and imaging. Throughout this paper, I will be referring both to the language used to define God and the images used to express God. By language, I am referring to pronouns and metaphors used to define God. When I speak of images, I am referring to

the creation of art and symbols that depict God, as well as internal images formed by one's own mind.

Mainstream Christianity does not have a history of practicing inclusive language to define God. The employment of masculine names and metaphors to describe God, such as Father, Lord, and King, features predominantly within Christian liturgy. Although inclusive language has been acknowledged by most fundamental Christian denominations, it has not often been met with positive response. In the year 2001 the Vatican of the Roman Catholic Church issued what is called the “Liturgiam Authenticam” (The Authentic Liturgy) in which the church hierarchy severely limit all efforts to provide an inclusive understanding of church liturgy, stating,

In particular: To be avoided is the systematic resort to imprudent solutions such as a mechanical substitution of words, the transition from the singular to the plural, the splitting of a unitary collective term into masculine and feminine parts, or the introduction of impersonal or abstract words, all of which may impede the communication of the true and integral sense of a word or an expression in the original text. Such measures introduce theological and anthropological problems into the translation. (Anonymous, 2001)

Statements such as the one above made by the Catholic Church, as well as other fundamental Christian denominations, serve to legitimize the obsolete patriarchal language used within Christian liturgy today. Even popular Bible colleges, where Christian leaders are taught, are banning the use of inclusive language. Beulah Heights College in Georgia claims to be “one of the America's fastest growing Bible colleges,” and is a member of the AABC (Accrediting Association of Bible Colleges), representing multiple Christian denominations (About Us, 2004). In his Spring 2004 syllabus, a prominent instructor of religion exclaims in bold at the bottom of the page “‘inclusive language,’ beepers and cell phones must be turned off while in class” (Johnson, 2004).

Although the movement toward reforming the language used inside the Christian church is small, its supporters, with strong and intelligent voices, are growing. As I continue processing my own understandings of inclusive language and seeking new spiritual growth, it is my hope to learn from those individuals who have studied feminist theology and who support the usage of inclusive language. I would like to contribute to the Christian community and the world's religions by offering some alternative approaches to spirituality and God-imaging that encompass the current ideas of a feminist Christian theology.

## **Literature Review**

Since the dawn of the feminist movement, people have become increasingly aware of the powers of gendered language in all societies. Although language has inspired beautiful and meaningful expression around the world, many feminists are attempting to illuminate one essential problem with language. In his book The Alphabet Versus The Goddess, Leonard Shlain states, "one pernicious effect of literacy has gone largely unnoticed: writing subliminally fosters a patriarchal outlook. Writing of any kind, but especially its alphabetic form, diminishes feminine values and with them, women's power in the culture" (1998). As it is important to understand the effects of language on women, it is equally important to understand the power that language has over all classes and races of people. For the purpose of this paper I have chosen to focus directly on language and imaging within Christianity and its effects on women. It is important, however, to understand that all issues of discrimination and exclusion concerning class,

race, gender, sexual orientation, and so forth within language and imaging are interconnected.

Historical scripture and language inside the Bible provide the basis of Christian thought and philosophy. Although feminist theologians, such as Letty M. Russel, struggle with traditional interpretations of the Bible, many also find validity and meaning in its teachings. Russel describes her feelings of conflict as she comments, “Perhaps it would seem more useful to give up on the Bible as a normative source of my theology, but I don’t seem to be able to do that. The biblical witness continues to evoke my consent, even as I reject many of its teachings as well as its patriarchal context” (1985).

Due to this internal conflict, feminist theologians have been working hard to apply their knowledge of the adverse effects of language to basic liturgy inside Christianity. A group of individuals calling themselves the “Inclusive Language Lectionary Committee,” has put together a series of books, which in their words, try “to speak of God as beyond differentiations of sex, so that when the church hears its scripture read, it is not overwhelmed by the male metaphors” (Bennet, et.al., 1983).

Recently, an entire version of The New Testament and Psalms has also been edited with the intent of offering an inclusive reading of the Bible. Editors of this new translation of the Bible theorize, “Christians in every culture around the world want to hear their Bible in the language of their time, speaking specifically to them, as well it should” (Gold, et. al., 1995). Language in Western culture has been slowly evolving throughout the centuries. The editions made to The New Testament and Psalms: An Inclusive Version remove all male pronouns used to define God in an effort to provide current readers of the Bible an accurate understanding of its teachings. Because the Bible

was historically written in Hebrew and Greek, many translation issues arise. Editors explain that inside original biblical writings of Hebrew and Greek, “all pronouns referring to God [are] masculine because both languages have grammatical gender, and the words for God in both languages are masculine” (Gold, et. al., 1995). Due to the historical context in which the Bible was written, many individuals who read the English translation mistakenly believe these masculine pronouns provide a literal understanding of God as “he,” or a male deity.

Metaphors are also discussed in the inclusive version of The New Testament and Psalms in order to clarify the biblical metaphor of “God as Father.” This metaphor is used so repeatedly throughout scripture in the Bible that today feminist theologians have found that “by speaking to God, and by referring to God again and again, as “Father,” one may begin to think of God, literally, as a “Father,” hence also a male being” (Gold, et. al., 1995).

Numerous feminist theologians have expressed powerful and studious opinions on the predominance of male metaphors and symbols of God inside the church. Many of these theologians (Thistlethwaite, 1989; Johnson, 1993; Ruether, 1983; Ruether, 1998; Carr 1996) have found, in the words of Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, that “the use of Father language in reference to God is a particularly key anchor for white Western patriarchy” (1989). The patriarchy that these theologians speak of does not focus solely on “the subordination of females to males, but the whole structure of Father-ruled society: aristocracy over serfs, masters over slaves, king over subjects, racial overlords over colonized people” (Ruether, 1983). Like the master/slave relationship of the old, patriarchy still threatens to overwhelm women today.

Christianity, therefore, with its white, male symbol of God is understood to support and solidify patriarchal dominance. Elizabeth Johnson examines the effects that fundamental Christian symbols of God may have on society, arguing,

The symbol of God functions as a primary reference for understanding experience, life, and the world. Hence, the way in which a faith community shapes language about God implicitly represents what it takes to be the highest good, the profoundest truth, the most appealing beauty. Such speaking, in turn, powerfully molds the corporate identity of the community and directs its praxis. (1993, pg. 4)

When the dominant praxis of a religious community is based upon the reverence of all things male, all “others” become excluded and marginalized. Susan Brooks

Thistlethwaite explains a relationship in which the dominant image of God as a powerful male figure both normalizes and legitimizes all patriarchal structures in modern society.

According to her, “God conceived as supreme ruler over all from whom other authorities take their cue is a theology of violence. Hierarchy introduces hierarchy. The absolute power of God legitimates the power of the father priest, the father of the country, the father of the family, and so on” (1989).

Feminist theologians would like to see a system in which Christianity provides a voice and a place for all individuals, where symbols for God “embrace the authentic humanness and fulfilled hopes of all persons” (Reuther, 1998). As long as Christianity is used as a tool to maintain patriarchy, the exclusion and belittlement of individuals will persist. Mary Daly provides hope to a growing religious feminist movement with her opinion that “as the essential victims of archaic God projections, women can bring this process of creativity into a new phase. This involves iconoclasm – the breaking of idols” (1979). If one wants to break free from what Elizabeth Johnson eloquently describes as “the transcendent, omnipotent, impassible symbol of God, the quintessential embodiment

of the solitary ruling male ego, above the fray, perfectly happy in himself, filled with power in the face of obstreperousness of others” (1993), one must make some powerful changes.

In the book A Woman’s Journey to God: Finding the Feminine Path, Joan Borysenko suggests, “For many people, a concrete image of God was installed during childhood, and no amount of effort can purge it from the hard drive of our neural circuitry. It lives on as an icon every time we open the folder named religion” (1999). Borysenko is a strong advocate of allowing people to find a spirituality and religion that feels real and authentic, and pushes those who read her book to find an image and a language to express God that they feel comfortable with. Other writers, such as Patricia Lynn Reilly in A God Who Looks Like Me: Discovering a Woman-Affirming Spirituality, have written to encourage women to explore their personal religious backgrounds and understand feelings of frustration that arise from lack of inclusive language inside mainstream religion.

Reilly, like Borysenko, believes that “we carry the language and images of traditional religion with us into adulthood long after we may have discarded a particular set of religious beliefs” (1995). In the book Dance of the Spirit, Maria Harris encourages women to develop an authentic and personal relationship with God by following a set of spiritual practices. Practices include elements such as daily meditation, art, answering questions for reflection, journaling, and other exercises. Other authors have succeeded in reaching women through more unconventional means. Ntozake Shange inspires many women with her choreo-poems, which have been turned into a play titled For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf. Throughout the play,

seven black women share the stories of their lives and traumatic hardships. At the end of the play, Shange has them repeat together this single, passionate and self-affirming sentence: “I found God in myself and I loved her, I loved her fiercely” (1977, p. 67). While most feminist theologians do not intend to replace masculine language for God with feminine language, it is recognized that Divine qualities in women need to surface and be legitimized “in a way that affirms that God both transcends and yet includes the fullness of the humanity of both men and women” (Reuther, 1998).

Like Shange, Alice Walker introduces her view of feminist theology through the fictional characters in her book The Color Purple. Inside a chapter titled “God is Inside you and Inside Everybody Else,” two main characters, Shug and Celie talk about their images of God. Celie is stuck with “trying to chase that old white man out of [her] head,” (Walker, 1982) and Shug reminds her throughout the chapter to remember that “God ain’t a he or a she, but an It” (Walker, 1982). In a paragraph applauded by many feminist theologians, Alice Walker’s character Shug states,

Man corrupt everything...He on your box of grits, in your head, and all over the radio. He try to make you think he everywhere. Soon as you think he everywhere, you think he God. But he ain’t. Whenever you trying to pray, and man plopp himself on the other end of it, tell him to git lost...Conjure up flowers, wind, water, a big rock. (p. 104)

Shug speaks for many feminist theologians attempting to reform patriarchal images of God.

In a study done by Kathleen Mulrenin, in which she examined the spiritual lives of five women from different religious backgrounds, she discovered that all the women “found it difficult to pray to a masculine image of the divine when they approached prayer with a profound desire to connect with this Other in a time of great turmoil” (1998). All

five women grew out of their childhood spiritualities into a more mindfully aware adult spirituality. Inside this growing spirituality, each woman found that in order to continue developing in relationship to God, while remaining true to her own personal growth, it was essential to expand the image of God. Everywhere, women are attempting to reveal the harmful effects of legitimizing only a male God form in the church, as well as attempting to reform their own spirituality and God-imaging practices.

Rosemary Luckett expresses her evolving images of God through her art. Through the creation of beautiful paintings, Luckett provides herself and all who view her work with alternative images of God. She believes that “feminine descriptions are a prerequisite for going on to the next step of visualizing God outside the realm of gender” (Luckett, 2001). While she finds comfort and inspiration from the divine female images that she creates, Luckett recognizes that “any image of God is just a ‘visual guess’—a way of coming to some understanding of the mystery of God through our senses” (2001).

Elizabeth Johnson agrees that “the holy mystery of the living God transcends all images,” but adds that “only if the full reality of women of all races and classes, as well as that of men, enters into our God symbol...can the idolatrous fixation on one image of God be broken” (2001). Luckett gives hope to feminist theologians, such as Johnson, as she empowers and motivates all to understand and relate to God on multiple levels through the creation of her paintings and collages.

In her study of the creation of personal religious symbolism, Patricia Gargaetas looks at “lesbian altarmaking” and the motivating forces behind the creation of one’s own altar or space of spiritual renewal. As women were questioned about their desires to create and maintain their own altar spaces, Gargaetas recognized their altermaking as “a

cognitive as well as an intuitive act, discerning and full of discriminating awareness” (1998). These women have taken it upon themselves to claim responsibility for their own spiritual health, and have done so by creating personal spaces where they can feel close to God without the constant strain of the masculine image of God. As one lesbian altarmaker announces, “despite my best efforts, ‘God’ still surreptitiously visits me as an old bald bearded man on a cloud. I hope the altar will exorcise him as it exalts the Goddess in her various guises” (Gargaetas, Patricia).

By now, I have recognized two major themes within feminist theology. One is the message that many women are in great need of healing practices and alternative spiritualities that are able to reconstruct the Father image of God into more woman-affirming images. The second theme, which I have not talked about in detail, concerns the usage of the term ‘inclusive’ language. Feminist theologians question how the definition of ‘inclusive’ should be shaped, as well as the best direction for it to take.

It is obvious to feminist theologians that the masculine pronouns and metaphors used predominantly within Christian liturgy need to change. The changes that should be made to the liturgy are widely debated. While many feminist theologians are goddess-oriented and therefore interested mainly in the creation of the new and alternative spiritualities, those who operate from a feminist Christian theology are attempting to reform teachings that are centuries old. Through a careful process of personal reflection and the study of Christian history, many theologians believe that feminist transformations may still be perceptible to mainstream Christianity.

It is with this hope that authors such as Elizabeth Johnson and Rosemary Radford Ruether present their progressive opinions on ‘inclusive’ language inside the church.

Johnson and Ruether do not advocate for a “reverse sexism, which would place women in dominant positions” (Johnson, 1993), nor do they support an androgynous image of God (Ruether, 1998). Both theologians recognize the need for all human beings to find commonality and self-affirmation through an image of God, as well as a divine distance that transcends human thought. With this in mind, Johnson proposes that the goal of feminist theology and inclusive language be,

The flourishing of all beings in their uniqueness and interrelation —both sexes, all races and social groups, all creatures in the universe. This calls for a new model of relationship, neither a hierarchal one that requires an over-under structure, not a univocal one that reduces all to a given norm. The model is rather inclusive, celebratory of difference, circular, feminist – we reach for the words. (p. 32)

Because the goals of these feminist theologians revolve around the equivalent recognition of both male and female aspects of God, it is an essential part of feminist theology to call attention to those feminine sides of God that have been overrun by patriarchy.

Numerous feminist theologians cite the significance of the female face of God, or Sophia/Wisdom/Spirit found in both Hebrew and Greek tradition (Torjesen, 1993; Johnson, 1993; Johnson, 2000; Ruether, 1998; Ramshaw, 1984). Sophia/Holy Spirit, the feminine side of God, has been ignored as an important part of the biblical trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. She is seen as that side most closely relating to humanity, and “her biblical figure reflects the roles of all three persons as she creates, liberates, and graces human beings in various strands of the wisdom tradition” (Johnson, 1993). Ruether describes her as Wisdom and “the presence of God as means of creation, revelation, and redemption. (1998). Because this feminine aspect of God has been largely ignored, many feminist theologians are attempting to bring her back. However, Johnson cautions against “understanding the holy spirit as the feminine dimension of the divine within a patriarchal

framework” (1993). A patriarchal framework, that subversively praises all elements that are masculine, can hinder honest love and authentic acceptance and exploration of the feminine deity.

As feminist theologians investigate new aspects of the feminine God, many have found it important to use predominantly feminine language and imaging techniques in their discourse. They seek to validate the feminine face of God and allow all people to relate to Her in order to change the dominant patriarchy within Christianity and allow for a new system in which the feminine does not “come out” of the masculine, or remain ignored and unseen. In order to convey this message, feminine aspects of God cannot be viewed through a system of patriarchy. Therefore, as feminist theologians reach for a system of inclusion of all human beings, it has become increasingly important to introduce elements of female symbolism for God. While Ruether reminds feminist theologians that “no image for God can be taken literally” (2001), many have found it essential to provide alternative symbols of the mystery of God that hold space for diversity and promote an egalitarian society. In the words of Elizabeth Johnson this symbolism is “not intended as a strategy of subtraction, still less of reversal. Rather [female symbolism for God] is an investigation of a suppressed world directed ultimately toward the design of a new world” (1993).

### **Research Questions**

As I researched various opinions about inclusive language inside mainstream Christianity, I wanted to gain a better understanding of those individuals who have processed the traditional patriarchal icons of God and have formed an alternative Divine

language and inclusive images of God. By language, I am referring to symbols, pronouns, and metaphors used to define God. When I speak of images, I am referring to the creation of art that depicts God, as well as internal images formed by one's own mind.

The first question that I pursued is, "What motivates people to adopt an inclusive understanding of God?" I was interested in examining the issues that arise for people who have experienced mainstream Christianity, and discovering the various reasons that people may have for choosing to transform fundamental patriarchal images of God into inclusive images.

My second set of questions revolved around gaining a better understanding of how individuals go about changing the original teachings of Christianity that are a part of their faith tradition. I asked, "What does an individual journey toward inclusive imaging of God involve?" "Once people decide that the patriarchal image of God is not ideal, how do they then reform their thinking?" and "What steps do people take in this process, and what do they find helpful as they stretch their thinking to challenge the widespread beliefs of dominant Christianity?"

Reflecting on the process that people go through to reform the language and images used to define God, I also examined difficulties experienced. I examined difficulties both within an internal, personal relationship to God and external, social ties to a religious community. The guiding questions addressed include, "How are the people who are reforming language and images used to more inclusively express God treated by their faith communities?" and "What composes a good definition of the term 'inclusive' and is it hard for faith communities to agree on a common definition?"

## **Methods**

### ***Sample***

I have interviewed four female Christian ministers and one nun, each from different denominations (Quaker, Lutheran, United Church of Christ, Presbyterian, and Catholic). In an effort to narrow the project I have interviewed only female ministers, although it is recognized that many male ministers and priests within the Christian religion practice inclusive language and are active participants in the discourse of feminist theology today.

I pre-selected my interview subjects with the intent of providing the most studied and scholarly views on inclusive language. All interview subjects fit the criteria of being learned in the field of inclusive language as well as practicing inclusive language and Divine imaging in personal spiritual practices, or within their church communities. My goals in this thesis do not center on gathering generalizable data and results. Instead, I have chosen to study the individual thought processes of various spiritual intellectuals in an effort to better understand and support the growing minority of individuals who believe in using inclusive language inside their faith communities.

### ***Recruitment***

The interview subjects were recruited in various ways, ranging from a personal relationship with a minister who was willing to be interviewed, to email recruitment letters (see appendix A), referrals by colleagues, and drop in appointments with potential interview subjects. All subjects recruited were informed of certain subject requirements, which included being a female minister or a nun, and practicing inclusive language inside their faith communities or within their personal spiritual practices.

### ***Procedures***

Interviews lasted approximately one hour in length, with the exception of one interview, which lasted 30 minutes. All interviews were audio taped in order to insure proper documentation. All subjects were aware of their voluntary involvement in the study, and were given the option to skip or decline to answer any interview questions. Consent forms (see appendix B) asking permission to audiotape the interview as well as to contact the participant for clarification of interview answers after the interview date were signed by each participant.

### ***Materials***

After securing subject participation for my interviews, I obtained tapes and a tape recorder in order to audiotape each interview. All interviews were conducted at the ministers' church, home, or another location of their choice (for sample of interview questions see appendix C). The audiotapes obtained for interview purposes were kept in a secure location. The tapes were destroyed upon completion of the transcription, and the transcripts were destroyed upon completion of the thesis.

### ***Analysis***

I am aware that within the scientific community today there is some debate as to the best way to study a phenomenon or a set of objects. In my studies of both qualitative and quantitative methods, I have come to the conclusion that the ideal method of study for my project fits within the boundaries of qualitative analysis. In my efforts to study and present the data obtained through each interview in the best possible manner, I have chosen to use the qualitative method of content analysis. This method of content analysis

allows for the systematic coding of interconnected themes, words, and concepts among the participants while also considering individual voice and opinion. The small nature of my study, along with the personal and exploratory elements found inside each interview, required a creative and open coding procedure.

## **Results**

I have had the pleasure of meeting with and interviewing five remarkable and unique female leaders, all from different Christian denominations located in western Washington. Throughout the months of March and April 2004 I have met with a Quaker pastor, a Lutheran pastor, a United Church of Christ pastor, a Presbyterian pastor, and a Catholic nun. During each interview I was welcomed into the participants' church, home, or other place of convenience and allowed to ask a predetermined list of questions. Each participant was asked a set of 16 interview questions and the interviews lasted for approximately one hour each, with the exception of one interview which lasted 30 minutes. All individual stories and experiences articulated during the interview process were given with both scholarly opinion and conscientious reflection. The results, formed by an accumulation of interviews with five extraordinary and intelligent women, are presented below. In no way do these results attempt to generalize. Instead, they are a reflection of five female Christian leaders whose voices speak within a slice of time inside a growing religious movement. Bold lettering signifies the guiding interview questions asked of each participant.

### **What branch of Christianity do you currently subscribe to?**

This question was intended to provide a sense of background for the women and to clarify their connection to the religious tradition of Christianity. I used this question to introduce my participants and to provide a brief sense of the branches of Christianity represented in this study. Mary Evelyn, a retired Lutheran pastor who now attends various churches as a guest speaker, was the only woman who did not name a distinct denomination, as she described her branch of Christianity as a “liberal, grace-based Christianity.” Claudette, a nun, subscribes to the Roman Catholic tradition of Christianity, Caryl to the Quaker tradition, Deborah to the Presbyterian tradition, and Sally to the United Church of Christ. After talking with the women directly it became clear to me that while they all identified with a particular branch of Christianity, they also allowed themselves the freedom of personal opinion and choice outside the boundaries of each traditional branch.

### **Tell me about your childhood images of God. What religion, if any, did you grow up in, and what were its images of God?**

Although all the women came from strong Christian roots, no two women grew up in the same Christian denomination. Claudette went to Catholic church with her family, Caryl depicts her childhood religion as “evangelical fundamental Christian,” Mary Evelyn went to an Episcopal church with her grandmother, Deborah portrays her childhood church as “if not Baptist, very similar to that style of worship,” and Sally went to a Presbyterian church. Three of the women characterized their childhood churches as conservative or fundamentalist.

As I studied each woman's response to this question it became increasingly important to document the language used for God. As the women brought me back into their childhood memories of religion and their first introductions to God I found that each was subjected to an image of a male God. It is important to note here the difference between the responses. Some women distinctly remembered an image of God as a male person, while for others God was a male deity. Some of the terms used to describe this male God include the following: enforcer of judgment, mean man, God the Father, God the Son, male person, loving Father, man as friend, somewhat fearsome but not fearful, and He. Terms that were not specifically male were also used to describe the childhood God and include the following: Love, loving God, God the Holy Spirit, and wind. No distinctly female images or terms were coded. Three of the five women bluntly state that, as a child, their God was unquestionably a male deity. Deborah provides an interesting perspective on her childhood memories of God, saying,

I mean, they certainly would have been very male-oriented images, only because it was such a revelation to me to discover anything else later on. So I guess I'm –I'm thinking backwards ya know. If it was such a revelation to sort of discover this possibility of not referring to God as male, it must have been taken for granted before that.

Likewise, Caryl remembers that, "God was a person, so and – and clearly a male person because all the pronouns were always male pronouns." Sally concludes simply that, "God was certainly male...partly because every time the Bible was read you get male pronouns."

Four out of the five women demonstrate that they felt a great lack of personal freedom to experience God as children. While Deborah acknowledges that her male-oriented images of God were taken for granted, Caryl goes one step further with this

discovery, claiming for her self, “I have a very difficult time when I think back about imaging God. I don’t. I’m not in touch with my own images as a child. They were all images given to me by a religious institution.” Mary Evelyn does not remember having “a visual image or a sense of God” as a child, and Sally contends, “I didn’t really have a personal sense of God.”

### **When and how did you start to think about the language used to express God?**

I received a wide mix of responses to this question, ranging from emotional and spiritual experiences, to more intellectual and structural experiences that led to a conscious examination of God language. Claudette remembers that her first introduction to a conscious analysis of God language came with Vatican II, a global convention of church leadership that convened in Rome in 1963. Through the structural changes that developed within her church, Claudette grew to learn about, and advocate for, inclusive human language and social organization inside the church, and also began to converse with many of the sisters concerning inclusive God language.

Mary Evelyn reported a mix of both intellectual and emotional experiences that led her to examine God-language more closely. After being exposed to the strict gender norms and the roles of the patriarchal faith tradition of her former husband, Mary Evelyn decided to rebel against the sexist notions in order to realize her full potential. The frustration she felt within the sexist faith tradition compelled her to read feminist literature and become exposed to an intellectual arena of thinking about God.

Deborah first starting thinking about the language used to express God while she was in college. She worshipped with the Episcopal Student Center and remembers her

first conscious realization that language for God was important, saying, “one of the female chaplains kind of introduced us to this concept that you didn’t always and only have to call God He, or call God Father.” Although Deborah expects that “there were possibly little glimmers of it earlier on,” she remembers her relationship and discussion with this female chaplain as valuable to her intellectual reflection about God language.

Caryl experienced a huge emotional awakening when, in her 40s, her husband committed suicide, causing an extreme shift in the way she lived her life. Through her exposure to the structural environment of a Quaker church, which held inclusive language as extremely important, and sitting in silence in a Trappist monastery, as well as discussions with a professor in seminary school, Caryl became aware of how much the language for God had affected her. She elaborates, “It wasn’t that the imaging changed the language so much, the language was something that I was exposed to and then started thinking about the umm very significant connection with language and imaging.”

Sally very openly related an experience to me in which, unlike Caryl’s experiences, the image of God opened the doors for her language to evolve. She had previously adhered to a philosophy in which she recalls, “I gave the *standard* answer which is ‘ohh, but when *I* say God and say He, I know that God is bigger than that.” She believes the most influential moment in her thinking about God language happened during a spiritual experience when she was praying. Through a beautiful moment of prayer, Sally remembers seeing an icon-like figure of Mary. She details, “She closed her mouth or something and I thought ‘this is an image of God.’ And once I had that, you see, then you can’t go back...It didn’t mean there was no He, but I also thought He has had press, ya know, for years and years and years and years.”

Each woman shared multiple experiences and emotions concerning first introductions to an analysis of God language, and each experience has proven to be unique.

**What does inclusive language, within the context of Christianity, mean to you?**

The term “inclusive language” has multiple and varied meanings to many people. The five women interviewed had many similarities in their definitions as well as differences. Inside her faith tradition, Claudette has chosen to focus her attention predominately on inclusive human language and women’s place within the hierarchal boundaries of the church. She argues, “You can’t say inclusive language without saying inclusive people...including both male and female in the liturgical services, in the expression of our love for God. I think it’s, the language is just one part of it, and I think if we can see that, that it’s just one part of it – it can’t help but take you to all the rest of it.” Claudette does not believe that Biblical scripture should be altered in regard to changing male references to God, but states that within her own personal beliefs, that she has “grown to want inclusive language more and more,” and relates this to the fact that she does believe that there is a feminine side to God.

Deborah recognizes that inclusive language for her falls into two categories: inclusive language for people, and gender inclusive language for God. She finds that she naturally uses inclusive language for people, while using inclusive God language is something that she has had to learn to do. She finds that “it’s easy enough to say people instead of mankind. It’s harder to say something else instead of God He. It’s harder to come up with that, it takes a little more creativity or a little more effort to do that.” Using

her own creative efforts, Deborah substitutes the word God for any male pronouns that arise. Providing an example of this she illustrates, “Ya know, God sent *God’s* only son, and so on.” She also uses different terms such as Divine and Holy One in her efforts to “broaden up the options.”

Mary Evelyn shares that she attempts to “use non-gender specific language.” She does not believe in creating the binary of God vs. Goddess and explains “I worship the Divine and I share that with people...when I say God I do not in any way mean a male patriarch figure. It is just a being beyond our understanding, bigger than we can know.” As she uses non-gender specific language Mary Evelyn succeeds in eliminating many male pronouns used for God.

Unlike Mary Evelyn, Sally emphasizes that “because *He* has had so much press, my feeling is gender-neutral does not chip away at He.” Sally’s version of inclusive language includes using gender-neutral language for God, while also throwing out new options for her congregation to process. For example, in a call to worship Sally may print out words for her congregation to say in unison which include phrases such as “our prayers to God mean we let Her hold us,” and “God is present here in this sanctuary- She is wise, He is glorious.” Ultimately, Sally maintains that she likes “to use the sense of mystery and wonder of God as, as kind of bottom line.”

Caryl’s response to this question succeeds in bringing together multiple opinions on inclusive God language. She proposes simply,

I think it’s about using language that limits God as little as possible. I think language always will limit God in some ways. But, to use language that intentionally is as – as open and as inclusive as possible. And really, that’s a challenge, but I mean, obviously, He is going to limit God much more than a neutral pronoun. But it’s not even just about male/female; it really is about having

a language that so opens the possibility of us seeing and experiencing God in multiple and varied and imaginative ways.

While each woman's response to this question was unique and personal, I found that when thoughts about inclusive God language were combined among four women a common consensus was revealed: one uses inclusive God language successfully when the terms and sentences used to describe and embody God convey mystery, bigness, limitless possibility, and much, much more than we can articulate.

**What emotions arise when you think about the issue of inclusive language inside your faith tradition?**

Claudette shares that she gets “a little provoked” because the structures of the institutional church do not allow for the changes that she finds important. She believes, however, that “it has changed a lot in the last 50 years and there's more to come.”

Mary Evelyn feels both frustration and hope. She has hope for there to be a greater prevalence of inclusive language in the future and points out that, “when a change comes it goes all the way this way and then [hand motions the other way]. Some people get it, some people go over board with it, and I'm hopefully – I , I'm sort of an in the middle person. But I have hope that people will understand the importance of it.”

Sally experiences a string of emotions, she is curious to see what will happen in the future and believes that she can count on the “Mary Daly's and all those people from the outside to keep chipping and kicking, and...” She believes that it is her place to continue to push the issue and continue the movement with perseverance and the feeling of possibility. She also experiences feelings of fatigue, specifying,

“Sometimes I feel tired. Ya know because you think ‘oh shall I put the *She* language in this time?’ Wouldn’t it be nice not to think...to not think, to just say, ya know, so it’s all filled with She and we don’t have to think twice that anybody’s going to think twice about it. But of course, I’d have to think twice. So, there’s this too, it’s just realistic.

Caryl also responds with a mix of emotions. She firmly believes that “all language does – really does frame who and how we experience God,” and because she has experienced “the devastation in [her] own life of having particular images of God which then translated to image of males, and images of females, to particular roles and what you’re allowed to do and not to do,” she finds the outcome tragic. However, she has channeled her angry emotions in “constructive ways” and also feels hopeful and energized to reach more people and allow “God to be accessible.”

Deborah separates her emotions concerning inclusive human language from her emotions concerning inclusive God language. She distinguishes the most passion when thinking about inclusive human language because of her experiences of exclusion and belittlement within religious social hierarchies. She highlighted some negative experiences surrounding women’s place and role inside the church. When reflecting on inclusive God language she asserts that “the strong male influences in my life, my father, my grandfather, and so on, were so loving and tolerant and good, decent people.” Deborah cannot relate to strong feelings of passion when reflecting on inclusive God language because male imaging for her is at times a comfort. She does, however, feel deeply committed to using inclusive God language because she believes that, “it makes the most sense to broaden the language so that as each person is hearing a given metaphor some will resonate with them more than others.” She feels a deep responsibility to practice both inclusive human and God language.

**What books, if any, do you remember first reading about inclusive language inside your faith tradition?**

As I compared responses to this question I found that the women interviewed were inspired and touched by such different writers and books that the only author mentioned twice was Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza.

Sally listed Rosemary Radford Ruether's Sexism and God-Talk, Schussler Fiorenza, Laurence Wilder's Biblical Affirmations of Women, Dorta Soella, and Carter Hayward's A Passion for Justice.

Caryl mentioned an author named Roberta Bondy, as well as Schussler Fiorenza, and an organization called Christians for Biblical Equality that has published numerous pamphlets on inclusive language.

Mary Evelyn mentioned a book titled The Feminine Face of God, and books by Matthew Fox, who, in her words, "got himself kicked out of the Catholic Church."

Deborah remembers her first formal introduction to writing about inclusive language came from a packet that she received during her first year orientation to Princeton Theology seminary school. She recalls, "And the first thing of seminary they hand you this huge packet, photocopied pages all about inclusive language and the policy of the school...they were kind of doing this little dance around the divine language at that point." She also referenced a children's book that has been extremely influential, called God is Like a Mother Hen.

Claudette did not remember reading anything specifically on inclusive language, but became inspired by reading books on women's experiences and growth and mentioned a book called Jubilee.

**Do you use inclusive language inside your faith tradition? If so, why?**

Claudette shared her opinion about the usage of inclusive language inside her faith tradition, explaining, “I can’t change what goes on in the liturgies but I can use it in my mind.” She did not give a direct reason for why she chooses to use inclusive language in her mind.

Mary Evelyn very simply and directly stated her opinions, declaring, “I do [use inclusive language]. And I do because it’s healthy and accurate.”

Sally presumed that she uses inclusive language for several reasons. She tells parishioners to “think about all the little girls growing up in the church,” and says “We tell them God is male; they are made in the image of God and all *He* is. Ahhh! Excuse me!” She also believes that there are justice reasons for using inclusive language.

Recognizing her position as a pastor, Caryl finds it very important to use inclusive language because she realizes the influence that she has on others as a prominent leader. She does not want to exclude anyone in her community. She is also a national trainer for a children’s spirituality program and believes that it is important “to create a safe place for children that is not dominated by particular language.”

Along with Sally and Caryl, Deborah mentioned children as being a large part of the reasoning behind her usage of inclusive language. She complains that she always attempts to use inclusive language and for all of her efforts she still hears her two young daughters talking about God, saying, “He, He, He, He, He.” Deborah strives to raise her daughters with a broader sense of God and attempts to fight against the pervasive use of male imagery for God as she uses inclusive language. While she experiences some set

backs with omnipresent male language and imaging for God, she is able to put a positive spin on the situation. Below is an excerpt in which Deborah shares a moment with one of her daughters.

One night, you know they blurt these things out at bedtime. When they're really supposed to be asleep is when these come out, and she goes "Mom, what do you think God looks like?" And I, of course, reflect the question back, "Well, what do *you* think God looks like?" And I'm fully expecting the beard and whatever and she goes, "I think God is a triangle." [laughs] I thought: hey there you go, I hadn't thought of that one! But there's no gender attached to a triangle as far as I can tell... and then she got into that God was a pink triangle. I just thought: well there you go, we must be doin' something right because, I don't know, there was no beard, there was no fluffy cloud or big white robe or anything.

**How do you present inclusive language to your religious/spiritual community? How do the members of your community respond?**

Claudette did not elaborate much on her presentation of inclusive language to her religious community, but she did talk about the responses of the elderly population that she works with. When working outside of scripture, Claudette attempts to "plant the seed that there is a feminine side to God...[and] God is all encompassing." She has found many of the elderly people to be open to new ideas, while some, who she describes as the "hanger-on," are not ready to give up old traditions. Although she believes most of the elderly people that she works with believe in and understand the usage of inclusive human language, she did not mention actively discussing inclusive God language with this population.

When sharing her approach to presenting inclusive language to her community Deborah used the phrase "non-threatening." She believes that she does "more modeling than direct teaching." While she does converse with members of her congregation when opportunities arise, she is conscious of how much she can push at a certain time and

when to take a step back. For example, Deborah is aware that in general her congregation would not accept a change in the words printed in their standard doxology. Deborah believes that for the most part the people in her congregation respond positively to her modeling of inclusive language and the ways in which she fits it into her ministry.

Mary Evelyn expressed feelings close to those of Deborah in that she did not want to force her community to look at inclusive language. She contends, “It’s more inviting people to think about something, rather than ‘in your face!’ because I don’t resonate to that. And I was a slow learner about it, so everybody’s at a different place in their journey.” While Mary Evelyn does not teach specifically about inclusive language, she offers her community diverse images and visions of God through her sermons and by altering words in hymns. She is also able to be very open with her opinions in a spiritual women’s group that she has developed. Mary Evelyn remembers that the only time she had a problem with her use of inclusive language was when she was the pastor of a small Lutheran congregation and a member of the church decided to leave while another became very fearful and, in Mary Evelyn’s words, was “afraid we were going to dance around cauldrons or something.”

Sally also wrestles with the best times and the best ways in which to present inclusive language to her community. As expressed earlier, she is comfortable with including female images for God in the worship service, and often uses neutral imaging techniques although she too remarks that, “I try to pick where I push it.” Sally has found that it is extremely important to present diverse images of God that include the feminine. She surmises,

It doesn’t feel quite right to me to just make it neuter-ah neutral because neutral in a way is like neutering, kind of like saying...And our brains will go back to

what's familiar, ya know: He. Even, ya know, we may not be using the He word for God but it's still there, we're not working against...I think it's like kind of relearned, particularly if people haven't had experiences of God as a woman.

Sally finds that her community does not respond with strong opinions concerning this issue, and she has not heard a response for or against her use of inclusive language.

In an effort to describe her methods for presenting inclusive language to her community Caryl expressed an opinion that captured a general feeling among the women interviewed. She hypothesizes, "I think it's true with any movement – but the feminist movement sometimes I think can become so passionate about it that all people hear is the passion and react against that and don't even hear what the issue is." Because the issue of inclusive language is so important to these women, it is at times a struggle to recognize that not everyone is in the same place. With this in mind, Caryl approaches inclusive language within her community carefully and is mindful about the areas toward which she channels her energy. When she preaches she may talk lightly on inclusive language and has addressed the worship team at her church to make sure that they understand that it is an important issue for them, as leaders, to think about. Caryl mentioned receiving a wide array of responses from her congregation. Some people have never thought about the issue of inclusive language and do not understand it; others react very strongly against her and believe that she is acting blasphemously. The majority of people, however, are what Caryl calls "in the middle" and are not reactive.

**Do you think that inclusive language could be accepted as a norm inside your church community, or is it already?**

Claudette recognizes that the hierarchy of the Catholic Church and the traditional structures of her religion will make it very difficult for inclusive language to be accepted

as a norm. She is not certain that she would like scripture to be changed, but notes, “Now they can’t tell us, they won’t or wouldn’t tell us, what to do or say as far as inclusive language normally, in our lives and in our ministries...if they do hold back a bit...in the liturgies, then that’s – that’s, I can’t do anything about that.” While Claudette wishes that the movement towards inclusive language would become an accepted norm inside her church she believes with patience that, “it will move in the right direction. Things happen slowly, you learn that after a while, not everything happens fast.”

Mary Evelyn, Caryl, and Deborah all believe that inclusive language could be accepted as a norm within their church communities. Caryl replies, “I really anticipate that’s what we would work towards and I will, as a pastor. Mary Evelyn offers, “I think it could be...I think for loving, open people it’s not a problem. For people whose faith is more in the structure, it’s more of a fearful thing.” Deborah believes that the resistance to inclusive language is losing its strength as older generations within her church community die off. She says that it is realistic to think, “it would kind of infuse the worship life of the church.”

Sally was the only woman who stated that inclusive language was already accepted as a norm inside her church community. While Sally’s use of inclusive language has been accepted inside her congregation and is a norm, there are still areas that Sally believes could use some work. She believes that people on the worship committee could make more of an effort to change Biblical terms that depict a masculine God into more gender inclusive terms.

**Could the issue of inclusive language be considered a political debate inside your church community?**

Because Sally mentioned that inclusive language was already a norm inside her community I refrained from asking her this question. Mary Evelyn, Caryl, and Claudette all agreed that within their church communities there was possibility for political debate concerning inclusive language. Claudette believes that “it can continue to be a subject of discussion...[and] will continue to be talked about now in different levels.”

Deborah did not see a political debate happening inside her church community. She comments, “I just don’t think people talk about it much.” Although Deborah models inclusive language for her congregation and people are aware of her opinions, she does not see a political debate arising in the future and instead mentioned talking with people on a smaller scale, one at a time.

**Do members of your church community feel that inclusive language threatens any religious traditions: If so, which? And why?**

Claudette believes that since Vatican II, people have become increasingly accepting of inclusive human language. She also believes that people in her community have been exposed to “a feminine side of God” and suggests, “I think it begins to change them in their thinking too about God and how to speak to God and that yes, God could be feminine. I think in our church though because we have a devotion to the blessed mother, the mother of God, that much of umm that, the woman symbol is Mary the mother of God.” Because Claudette herself does not believe in changing Bible scripture she has not had many conversations with her church community concerning their feelings on

bringing inclusive God language in to scripture. She adds, “I think it would be an interesting thing to ask them.”

Deborah mentioned that many people in her church community believe that inclusive language threatens their standard doxology, or liturgical hymn of praise to God. For at least the time being, Deborah has decided to hold off on changing the words to the doxology because she believes that the majority of individuals inside her community are too attached to the traditional words. She believes that this will change with time however, and observes, “Our congregation is so much younger than when we got here, and so that, I see that as something that is honestly quite temporary.” Deborah also mentioned the baptismal formula as being an area in which many people would not allow inclusive language. She remembers, “In our seminary classes, I mean our worship classes, it was always made very clear to us that in the Presbyterian church the baptismal formula I mentioned, ‘I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,’ that you don’t mess with that.” Deborah believes that the idea behind sustaining the baptismal formula in it’s original form is to provide a sense of interconnectedness for all Christian churches, saying, “I found that pretty powerful actually that no matter what church you go in anywhere in the world the idea is, the idea behind that is that we all share one baptism.” Therefore, at this point in time, she has chosen not to alter the baptismal words to fit inclusive ideals.

Mary Evelyn, Caryl, and Sally all mentioned areas of scripture which, when altered by inclusive language, were a threat to their communities. Caryl explains that some people in her congregation feel that inclusive language threatens the authority of scripture, and points out, “I mean fundamental Christianity holds this image of God that

is so somehow seen as, that they have to defend the truth, and so anything that changes or threatens what they perceive to be the truth is...” Mary Evelyn labeled the Lord’s Prayer and the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm as many people’s “comfort items, like a baby’s blanket.” She recognizes that inclusive language would be very threatening to these areas, and described the responses of many people by saying, “They want it ‘like that.’ They’re willing to entertain images of other things but don’t mess with those words.” Likewise, Sally finds that some people are very surprised and threatened when words from the Bible are altered. She has currently changed a call to worship that previously began with the words, “this is the word of God.” She now begins with “let us listen for the word of God” in the hopes that the scripture may be, in her words, held “more loosely and dynamically.”

**What do people say who challenge your use of inclusive language? How do you respond to people who challenge your use of inclusive language?**

Claudette has not experienced people challenging her use of inclusive language, and postulates that comments “would probably go to the pastor first, ya know, to a liturgy department first.”

Sally’s church community has incorporated inclusive language into its general worship service for the most part and she has not been confronted with challenging words. However, as inclusive language has evolved to become more of a norm in her church, Sally has identified another problem. She puts forward,

There is a problem though and that is that it can get into being “pc” ya know, “well we’re politically correct here and so God is both male and female” which therefore...if somebody just does that, they haven’t moved it to their heart. And churches like this can tend to do that, ya know, ‘well we’re pc here, so God isn’t

only male.’ But I don’t know if people then make that it’s important for us to relate to God in her female imagery.

Sally does not want her congregation to adopt inclusive language solely to be politically correct.

Mary Evelyn has experienced many challenges to her use of inclusive language and believes that most people challenge her out of fear. She interprets “They want to do the right thing, and that’s what they were told was the right thing when they were little, or when they were confirmed so they had to memorize the gosh darn thing!” Mary Evelyn believes that many people get a fear-based message as children, which allows them to believe that changing scripture or fundamental tradition will send them to hell. She responds to the people who challenge her use of inclusive language in a variety of ways. One response that she uses is: “I hear what you’re saying and I respect that, but I don’t agree.” If it is safe to have a conversation with a person, Mary Evelyn will attempt to talk with that person, although at times she has had to take a step back from people who were not open to a respectful conversation.

Deborah specifies that the general response she receives from people who challenge her use of inclusive language is, “Don’t take that away from me.” She explains, “the way that folks have been brought up to address God is deeply personal and very tied in to their whole spirituality in my understanding.” In her responses to these people, Deborah tries to maintain an understanding that she does not want to take anything away from them, and instead is in favor of opening up the options for how people relate to God. She invites people to, in her words, “cultivate an awareness of how their language

might impact someone else's." She also reminds people that "if God is much, much more than Father, than God is also much, much more than some gender neutral pronoun."

When people challenge Caryl's use of inclusive language they tend to reference the Bible. She finds that people say, "Well that's the way the Bible was written," and tend to have a very literalistic understanding of how scripture was created. In any response, Caryl believes that it is "important always to understand what kind of place of freedom people have to really look at an issue." If a person is clearly not ready to engage in a conversation with her, Caryl refrains from active discussion. If she judges a person to be prepared to have a respectful conversation she will validate their opinions while also including her own thoughts on inclusive language. She points out,

I know my own experience, what I find most helpful is simply maybe just to hope to just plant one little seed about, there really is something to this inclusive language that is so beyond what I'm able to just give you a nice ten minute lecture on...it has to do with how we think about God and it's huge.

**What is your current idea of the Deity? How does this affect your spiritual practices?**

Claudette is very comfortable with the image of God as loving Father and loving Son. As a nun she clarifies, "I'm religious so I'm trained more to think more in terms of God as, as my, my other half." She believes that one aspect of the feminine side of God comes from an ability to find the feminine in Jesus. Claudette lives in a life of religion and spirituality and believes that, "God has always been there and will always be there." She declares, "that's the reason why I'm here, why I exist, is because there is a deity, there is a God."

Mary Evelyn elucidates, “My idea of the Divine is the most loving, creative energy that gives life.” She goes on to talk about some influential reading and reflects, “God is a verb, God is a being, a creating or giving Divine energy and essence, and I’m so at peace with that.” While talking about spiritual practice, Mary Evelyn shared that her place in the personal spectrum of her spiritual life currently is to “just be” with God. She reports, “I just feel comfortable *being*. It doesn’t mean that I don’t pray, or praise or any of those things. But it’s just – it’s just a really neat space to be in.”

Deborah responded by saying, “I am absolutely convinced that God is a God of grace and a God of love.” She brings her understandings of God into the spiritual life of her church community and asks herself at all times, “what will get across to that person, in that situation, a message of grace?” Deborah believes that within her understandings of God there is also room for challenge and in her words, “holding the bar up high in terms of expectations of discipleship and all that.” Ultimately however, she repeats, “When it all comes down to it, it’s about grace; it’s about God’s love.”

Sally believes that her ideas of the Deity are constantly changing. She details, “God has been a little too friendly...God is more fierce – umm – than God used to be...more fierce but in an intimate way. I mean who do we ask things of us but those who love us?” As she processed some of the readings that she had done, Sally reported that she attempts to hold her image of God loosely. She explores, “if we’re wrestling at all then...then more of God has to come out, than what I know of God now.” Therefore, her spiritual practices revolve largely around retreating to struggle with ideas of God, although she believes that it is limiting to separate spiritual practices from other arenas of life because, in her words, “other arenas of life are infused with God, right?” As she got

deeper in to explaining her ideas of God, Sally mentioned the idea of pantheism, which she describes as “God is in things and is more than things...God is intensely immanent and also intensely transcendent.”

Caryl talked about an understanding of God that was in constant, evolving motion. She explains, “There’s an ever expanding mystery of who God is.” Caryl believes that all people carry a deep longing for something more than who we are. Referencing a book titled, Against an Infinite Horizon, Caryl provides an example of her approach to understanding God, elaborating,

In any close, intimate relationship, the first task of that relationship is to console each other for the fact that you cannot, not disappoint each other...life and relationships will always be blessed in what we long and pray for...but somehow to be present to that limitation allows you to look at whatever it is, relationship or experiences, against an infinite horizon, knowing that there is that of God beyond that.

Therefore, inside Caryl’s understanding of the Deity there is a sense of what she calls “the more, the beyond, the circle within this outside of a circle,” and she rests with the fact that God is more than she can image or articulate. Caryl believes that her evolving understandings of God have freed her spiritual practices. She now seeks for what Celtic spirituality calls a “thin place,” where in a life of constant demand, frustration, and production/consumption, she and others can “inhabit a thin place where there’s as little between us and God...so that we can be more accessible to this infiniteness, this bigness, this more.”

**When reflecting on your personal spiritual practices (ex: praying to yourself) do you use inclusive language?**

(Due to an error, there is no data to report for Claudette concerning this question)

Sally reads a variety of books during her morning prayer time and finds that many of the influential readings that she reflects on include language that is very exclusive and male oriented. She translates the sexist language she reads into more inclusive language, although when she prays she recalls, “I just try to attend to the moment and attend to God in the moment and not say ‘oh, am I letting go of Her?’ ya know, ‘my back to Him’...and my back to this...” Ultimately she knows that she is praying to what she calls “a wordless mystery, which is She and is He and is so much more,” and she will use whatever language inspires her in the moment.

Mary Evelyn believes that she practices inclusive language within her personal spirituality and replies simply, “I think I use non-gendered language.”

Caryl shares that her personal spiritual practices have become “so much less language oriented anymore...so much beyond words.” She finds that inclusive language must find a place inside her personal spiritual practices because her images for God change so often, and also because, in her words, “it’s so beyond thinking of God as a person.”

Deborah believes that when she is praying on her own she tends to say things such as, “gracious God, merciful God, loving God, [and] almighty God...” She likes to place adjectives in front of God and recognizes that when she is addressing God directly that she “doesn’t even have to use the third person pronoun.”

**If you were given the choice of a creative medium to express God, what would you choose? Examples include painting, dance, music, written word, poetry, etc. If you yourself would not create a medium to express God, have you seen another person's or group's expression that moved you?**

Claudette shared her opinion about creative mediums to express God declaring, "If you want music or art or that, yeah I mean there's all kinds of pictures around here showing God in another way. But I think it's the human people you meet every day where you find God. You look in their eyes." Claudette is also able to see God in nature and the creative talents of others.

Caryl responded to this question in a number of ways. She shared that her own personal choice of creative mediums to express God included a variety of elements including silence, movement, prayer walks, art, and journaling with colors and pencils. She does not believe in big productions that, she says, sometimes focus "so much on the mechanics and doing it in a particular way." She enjoys creative expressions that give rise to a real, authentic place and expresses that "creativity is just so to me connected with spirituality and paying attention and noticing what you notice and responding to how you feel like responding and having that freedom to do that."

Deborah shared that music is a very powerful creative medium for her. She enjoys sitting in Taize worship services and listens to repetitive lyrics being sung in a beautiful melody as she prays. She also enjoys artistic images. In terms of what she herself creates to express God, Deborah offers, "Probably written word more for me, in terms of my natural inclinations or gifts."

Mary Evelyn mentioned that she had seen creative expressions of music and art that moved her. She also specified dance and body prayers as being her own creative

outlets for God, saying, “Well, you use your...you move – you use your body! Your whole body is engaged in doing it, feeling it.”

Sally was not certain that she related to this question at this time in her life. She analyzes, “I mean my own theology is in a way we are both assaulted and just caressed, um maybe lightly brushed with God all the time. So, creating that in a way almost feels like-why?” She wants people to stay within their own unique senses of God and says, “ya know, go into an empty room... where there’s nothing.”

**Are there any other thoughts that you would like to share with me?**

Responses to this question have been incorporated in to previous areas.

## **Discussion**

As I analyzed the results from each individual interview, it became increasingly important to me to present the voices of these women in a manner that stayed true to individual opinion and experience while also attempting to merge those opinions and experiences when possible. Because the issue of inclusive language is not openly discussed in all Christian communities I find it particularly important to present an in-depth look at a moment in time in which five Christian women leaders were able to openly and honestly share their thoughts on a religious inclusive language movement.

Issues surrounding religion and spirituality are deeply personal and it was to be expected that the responses given for each question would not merge into one combined answer. All of the women, at some point in the interview process expressed the idea that

a personal spirituality does not remain still and latent; it evolves and is in continuous motion as we learn and grow through new experiences.

There is no one answer to the research questions that I posed earlier, starting with, “What motivates people to adopt an inclusive understanding of God?” If I were to respond to that first question by combining various answers of my interview participants I might say that one is motivated to adopt an inclusive understanding of God when more is needed, when the static notions of God that preside everywhere are no longer enough.

My second question is “What does an individual journey towards inclusive imaging of God involve?” Adding on to my last response, my research suggests that an individual journey towards inclusive imaging of God involves intense and honest personal reflection and awareness, and an ability to give oneself the freedom to find a relation or connection with God that feels real and authentic and individually creative. All of the women interviewed have created various means that they are able to use to grow with God, and all elements in these women’s individual spiritualities are unique and special.

My third question is “How are the people who are reforming language and images used to more inclusively express God treated by their faith communities?” My results from this study indicate that for the most part, when introduced with balance, good judgment, and patience, inclusive language is slowly accepted into faith communities with no dire consequences for the faith leader. The women I have interviewed have shown me that when a faith leader knows a congregation and witnesses its needs and its fears, there is a great possibility for an introduction to elements beyond the traditional boundaries of Christianity.

As expected, my results show a mix of opinion about what the term “inclusive” means in reference to Christianity. Some of the women separated inclusive human language from inclusive God language and wanted to talk about each separately. Most of the women agree that the term inclusive inside Christianity has to do with opening up language and options for how we relate to God in order to reach as broad a community as possible. Some opinions about the term “inclusive” in relation to God language include a feeling that gender-neutral language and imaging are sufficient, while others remain convinced that feminine language for God must be used, along with gender neutral terms, in order to break free from an exclusive idea of God as male. In comparing the responses of my activist interviewees to the feminist theologians I studied, I find that Sally is the only practicing pastor who is in line with the dominant opinion among feminist theorists. Elizabeth Johnson, a leading feminist theorist believes, like Sally, that,

One effective way to stretch language and expand our repertoire of images is by uttering female symbols into speech about divine mystery. It is a complex exercise, not necessarily leading to emancipatory speech...Reorienting the imagination at a basic level, this usage challenges the idolatry of maleness in classic language about God, thereby making possible the rediscovery of divine mystery, and points to the recovery of the dignity of women created in the image of God (Johnson, 1993).

While Sally mentions a freedom in which she has the ability to express the feminine in creative, and at times what she calls “calmly subversive,” ways, not all Christian leaders experience this freedom and not all leaders choose to reform images of a male God by applying the feminine.

There are still many questions left unanswered as to the ideal way to present inclusive language to a religious community. It would be interesting to study the diverse effects that various approaches to inclusive language have on members of church

communities. Are there certain steps that are vital to take in the implementation of inclusive language within Christian communities? Would it be possible to create a guidebook for Christian leaders attempting to reform male images of God within their communities? These are questions left unanswered as the inclusive language movement slowly moves ahead.

### **Limitations**

This study has experienced many limitations. As an inexperienced interviewer, I found that at times it was difficult to draw out the responses in my participants, therefore sometimes not allowing them to voice complete answers to my questions. I also experienced a technical difficulty during one of the interviews, which required me to conduct the interview twice. This may have skewed the results from one interviewee because of the fact that she was given a larger amount of time to reflect on her answers. I used a method of content analysis that required me to code the responses given in a creative and open manner. In an ideal coding situation, it is important to have at least two people looking over the material in order to get as objective an analysis as possible. I coded responses alone and therefore my results do not have strong reliability.

## Conclusion

*I have not worshiped God  
From fear of God's fire,  
Nor for love of God's garden  
I have worshiped God  
For love of God  
And longing for God.*

*~Rabia, woman sufi mystic*

I am honored and amazed at the amount of reflection and honest emotion that my participants were able to share with me, and deeply respect the individual leading styles of each interviewee, as well as their unique spiritual processes. This study has revealed the importance of open discussion about inclusive language inside Christianity. It is my hope that through this process of sharing and growing, more religious leaders and spiritual seekers will discover the freedom and creativity to express God in limitless ways.

The direction of each human's spiritual journey is endless in possibility, creativity, change, and mystery. I face my own journey with a new confidence and an awareness of the limitless directions that I will experience inside my evolving spirituality. I am not ashamed to stray from mainstream notions of God, or traditional guidelines and roles, in which the best ways to achieve Divine connection are outlined and tightly monitored by religious hierarchy and patriarchal ideals. I have proven to myself, simply, that I can articulate the concerns that I have with mainstream Christianity. I am at peace with my demands for inclusive language within the larger sphere of the Christian tradition and have gained hope and motivation from Christian leaders who are able to articulate honest and reflective spiritual truths. I seek religious guidance through multiple

and varied ways and my spiritual path will continue to cross the paths of others who nurture and inspire.

I am aware that authentic creativity and energy give rise to remarkable and deep connection to God. When one experiences a wide array of freedoms through which to channel creative energy and emotion, a longing for God breathes new air and continues to grow. I have a long list of personal freedoms: freedom to sit in silence, freedom to form my own ideas and images of Divine longing and then to speak clearly and openly about them with no threat of danger or ill treatment, freedom to struggle with ideas of myself and of God, freedom to hear my struggles validated and accepted, and freedom to express God's mystifying presence in whatever ways I see fit. During my journey of life I seek guidance only from that which is able to give me the freedom I deserve to experience the divine energy and presence of God.

## References

- About us homepage (Beulah College) [online] Available:  
[http://www.beulah.org/bhbc\\_overview.htm](http://www.beulah.org/bhbc_overview.htm)
- Anonymous. (2001). Vatican issues new rules for liturgical translations in America. America Press, 185, p. 5.
- Bennett, Robert A., et.al. (Eds). (1983). An inclusive language lectionary New York: The Pilgrim Press.
- Borysenko, Joan. (1999). A woman's journey to god: Finding the feminine path. New York: Riverhead Books.
- Carr, Anne E. (1996). Transforming grace: Christian tradition and women's experience. New York: Continuum Publishing Company.
- Daly, Mary. (1979). Why speak about god? In Christ, Carol P. and Judith Plaskow (Eds.), Womanspirit rising: A feminist reader in religion (pp.210-218). New York: HarperCollins.
- Gargaetas, Patricia. (1995). Altared states: lesbian altarmaking and the transformation of self. Women and Therapy, New York.
- Gold, Victor Roland, et. al. (Eds). (1995). The new testament and psalms: an inclusive version. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Harper, Jennifer. (2004, February 17). Most Americans take bible stories literally. The Washington Times. [Online] Available:  
<http://www.washtimes.com/national/20040216-113955-2061r.htm>
- Harris, Maria. (1989). Dance of the spirit: The seven steps of women's spirituality New York: Bantam Books.
- Johnson, Dr. Rev. Percy D. (2004). Spring Semester 2004 "Bi 322 new testament epistles" [online] Available:  
[http://www.beulah.org/Files/PDF%20for%20SP04/P\\_Johnson/BI%20322.pdf](http://www.beulah.org/Files/PDF%20for%20SP04/P_Johnson/BI%20322.pdf)
- Johnson, Elizabeth A. (1993). She who is: The mystery of god in feminist theological discourse. New York: Crossroad
- Johnson, Elizabeth. (2000) Holy wisdom: Image of god's saving grace. The Living Pulpit, 9, 6-7.
- Johnson, Elizabeth. (2001). Naming god she: The theological implications. The Princeton Seminary Bulletin, 22, 134-149.

- Luckett, Rosemary. (2001). The feminine face of god. The Other Side, 9, 22-24.
- Mulrenin, Kathleen. (1998). Women's psychospiritual paths before, during, and after finding it difficult to pray to a male god. In Ron Valle (Ed.), Phemenological inquiry in psychology: Existential and transpersonal dimensions. (pp. 247-270). New York: Plenum Press.
- Ramshaw, Gail Schmidt. (1984). Letters for gods name – Q and W. In Ann Loads (Ed.) Feminist theology: A reader. (pp.165-168) London: Westminster Press.
- Reilly, Patricia Lynn. (1995). A god who looks like me: discovering a woman-affirming spirituality. New York: Ballantine Books.
- Ruether, Rosemary Radford. (1983). sexism and god-talk: toward a feminist theology Boston: Beacon Press.
- Ruether, Rosemary Radford. (1998). Introducing redemption in christian feminism Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press.
- Ruether, Rosemary Radford, & Gross, Rita M. (2001).Religious feminism and the future of the planet: A Buddhist-Christian conversation. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group.
- Russel, Letty M. (1985). Authority and the challenge of feminist interpretation. In Letty M. Russel (Ed) Feminist interpretation of the bible (pp. 137-146). Philadelphia: Westminster Press.
- Schlain, Leonard. (1998). The alphabet versus the goddess: The conflict between word and image New York: Penguin Group.
- Shange, Ntozake. (1977). For colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf. New York: Bantam Books.
- Thistlethwaite, Susan Brooks. (1989). Sex, race, and god: Christian feminism in black and white. New York: Crossroad.
- Torjesen, Karen Jo. (1995). When women were priests: Women's leadership in the early church and the scandal of their subordination in the rise of Christianity. New York: Harper Collins Publishers.
- Walker, Alice. (1982). The color purple. New York: Harcourt.

## Appendix A

### Sample Recruitment Letter

Hello, my name is Hope Brown. I am currently an undergraduate in the Women Studies program at the University of Washington, and I am in the process of writing my senior thesis. I am extremely interested in women's issues within the Christian church and would like to interview you for my thesis project. My thesis focuses on the growing prevalence of the usage of inclusive language inside the Christian church. My goal is to better understand female Christian pastors who use inclusive language inside the church and within their own personal spiritual practices. By inclusive language I am referring to the equivalent usage of both male and female terms and images to define and talk about God, or gender-neutral language and imaging. During the interview process I may ask you questions such as "When and how did you start to think about the language used to express God?" "Could the issue of inclusive language be considered a political debate inside your church community?" and "What is your current idea of the Deity? How does this affect your spiritual practices?" It would be an extreme honor to interview you for this project.

If you believe that you may have the time to meet with me for an approximately one-hour interview during the months of February or March, please let me know by emailing me at [hopebrn@u.washington.edu](mailto:hopebrn@u.washington.edu), or calling me at (206) 545-3726. The interview would be done in the setting of your choice and would be audiotaped to provide accurate documentation. You would have the choice to remain confidential if you wish. If you have further questions or concerns that you would like to address, please feel free to contact me.

Thank you for your time,  
Hope Brown

## Appendix B

### University of Washington Consent Form *Inclusive Language Inside the Christian Church*

Investigator:

Hope Brown

Student

Women Studies Department

Telephone:  
(206) 545-3726

e-mail: hopebrn@u.washington.edu

#### **Investigator's Statement**

I am asking you to be in a research study. The purpose of this consent form is to give you the information you will need to help you decide whether or not to be in the study. Please read the form carefully. You may ask questions about the purpose of the research, what we would ask you to do, the possible risks and benefits, your rights as a volunteer, and anything else about the research or this form that is not clear. When all your questions have been answered, you can decide if you want to be in the study or not. This process is called 'informed consent.'

#### **PURPOSE AND BENEFITS**

I want to better understand the personal process that Christian religious leaders go through on individual journeys toward an inclusive image of God. I would like to interview female Christian pastors about their experiences with reforming mainstream Christian images of a male deity into more inclusive images, both inside their personal spirituality and in their church communities. I hope the results of this study will provide a better understanding of a growing culture of individuals who believe in using inclusive language and imaging techniques to define God. You may not directly benefit from taking part in this research study.

#### **PROCEDURES**

If you choose to be in this study, I would like to interview you about your experiences as a pastor of a church community. The interview will last about one hour, and will focus on your usage of inclusive language both inside your church community and within your personal spiritual practices. For example, I will ask you, "When and how did you start to think about the language used to express God?" "What emotions arise when you think about the issue of inclusive language inside your faith tradition?" and "Do you use inclusive language inside your faith community? If so, why?" You do not have to answer every question.

I would like to audiotape your interview, so that I can have an accurate record. Only my advisor (Dr. Kate Noble) and I will have access to the audiotapes, which will be kept in a secured location. I will transcribe your interview tape within 3 weeks of your interview and destroy the tape. Please indicate below whether or not you give your permission for me to audiotape your interview.

## RISKS, STRESS, OR DISCOMFORT

Some people feel that providing information for research is an invasion of privacy. I have addressed concerns for your privacy in the section below. Some people feel self-conscious when they are audiotaped.

## OTHER INFORMATION

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You can stop at any time. You may specify during the time of interview whether or not you wish your name to remain confidential. If the results of this study are published or presented, I will not use your name if you wish you remain confidential.

I may want to re-contact you to clarify information from your interview. In that case, I will telephone you and ask you for a convenient time to ask you additional questions closely related to your interview. Please indicate below whether or not you give your permission for me to re-contact you for that purpose. Giving your permission for me to re-contact you does not obligate you in any way.

I may want to quote you using your name. In that case, I will ask you to review the quote and edit it before giving your written permission to publish the quote with your name.

If you have any questions about this research, please contact Hope Brown at the telephone number or e-mail listed above. If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, please contact the University of Washington Human Subjects Division: 206-543-0098.

---

Signature of Investigator

Printed Name

Date

Subject's statement

This study has been explained to me. I volunteer to take part in this research. I have had a chance to ask questions. If I have questions later on about the research I can ask Hope Brown, the investigator. If I have questions about my rights as a research subject, I can call the University of Washington Human Subjects Division at (206) 543-0098. I will receive a copy of this consent form.

\_\_\_\_\_ I give my permission for the researcher to audiotape my interview

\_\_\_\_\_ I do NOT give my permission for the researcher to audiotape my interview

\_\_\_\_\_ I give my permission for the researcher to re-contact me to clarify information.

\_\_\_\_\_ I do NOT give my permission for the researcher to re-contact me to clarify information.

---

Signature of subject

Printed name

Date

## Appendix C

### *Interview Questions*

- 1) What branch of Christianity do you currently subscribe to?
- 2) Tell me about your childhood images of God. What religion, if any, did you grow up in, and what were its images of God?
- 3) When and how did you start to think about the language used to express God?
- 4) What does inclusive language, within the context of Christianity, mean to you?
- 5) What emotions arise when you think about the issue of inclusive language inside your faith tradition?
- 6) What books, if any, do you remember first reading about inclusive language inside your faith tradition?
- 7) Do you use inclusive language inside your faith tradition? If so, why?
- 8) How do you present inclusive language to your religious/spiritual community? How do the members of your community respond?
- 9) Do you think that inclusive language could be accepted as a norm inside your church community, or is it already?
- 10) Could the issue of inclusive language be considered a political debate inside your church community?
- 11) Do members of your church community feel that inclusive language threatens any religious traditions: If so, which? And why?
- 12) What do people say who challenge your use of inclusive language? How do you respond to people who challenge your use of inclusive language?
- 13) What is your current idea of the Deity? How does this affect your spiritual practices?
- 14) When reflecting on your personal spiritual practices (ex: praying by yourself), do you use inclusive language?
- 15) If you were given a choice of a creative medium to express God, what would you choose? Examples include painting, dance, music, written word, poetry, etc. If you yourself would not create a medium to express God, have you seen another person's or group's expression that moved you?
- 16) Are there any other thoughts that you would like to share with me?

