Language Matters:
Towards an Inclusive Community

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'Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me.' This English proverb may be well known, but is it really true? On the contrary, language is powerful and can be used to hurt others. Our language and words can also alienate or exclude others, when these do not acknowledge their presence. For instance, in a multi-lingual society such as South Africa, even the enforced or dominant use of one particular language, such as English, in a gathering where many different languages are spoken by the people involved, can marginalise those who do not speak it as a first language – and cause them to refrain from participation.

In this essay, I will attempt to explore what inclusive language is, in the context of the Christian Church in South Africa, and from my perspective and experience within the Anglican Church. My focus is on inclusive language with respect to gender – although I will keep contexts of race and age in mind as well – because my own experience as a white woman priest has meant that the issues of gender and language have been those which have affected me most. I remember the early days before women were allowed to be ordained priest, when I was the only woman deacon in the diocese of Cape Town. After nearly a year of regular meetings with my male clergy colleagues, one of them referred to us all as "brothers in Christ". Almost immediately there was a chorus of "and sister!" from those with whom I worked most closely. I appreciated the fact that they had learned to include me, yet it still felt as if I were invisible since I had somehow also been included as a "brother".

We are also aware that in South Africa people have been called names that are racist, offensive and entirely unacceptable – all that is the opposite of inclusive language. Sometimes we may even refer to older people or children in a way which is alienating or makes them feel invisible or useless. If the church is to be a faith community or a society which is welcoming to all, where everyone feels included, we need to pay attention to the way in which we use language. This is one way in which the church can participate in the process of transformation.

Inclusive language

Inclusive language attempts to include all people and exclude none on the basis of any factor which might in some way reinforce prejudice or stereotype. The National Council of Churches of Christ, USA, defines it as follows: "Inclusive language reflects that all people are full human beings with equal value and dignity; it avoids excluding, demeaning or stereotyping anyone on any basis; its personal images for God reflect analogously all humanity, without favor to any" (1983: 10). It is thus clearly a vitally important issue for the church in South Africa, given the history of apartheid and the devastating consequences of this system of legalised racial oppression – where every person's humanity was defined by race and/or ethnicity and where different values were placed on different race groups.

But we need to go still further than race or gender. We need to be aware of society's many prejudices, which we often unconsciously perpetuate through our language: prejudices relating to class, age, physical ability, heterosexism, and many others. It is also important to take into account the diversity of people and their experiences within the church; to ask whether the language in the liturgy and worship reflects that diversity or whether it speaks only to a narrow spectrum of the membership – and, whether it is alienating to any.

Bearing these questions in mind, it becomes apparent that language which is inclusive and meaningful for me as a white, English-speaking, educated, woman priest in the Anglican Church may not be as meaningful to women or men from a different context, language and background. Language in liturgy and worship, it seems to me, needs to reflect a diversity of South African experience and imagery in a way that is both inclusive and meaningful.

Why is inclusive language so important in the church?

When I came upon a little girl's letter to God three times in the same week, it impressed upon me just how important this issue of inclusive language is. The letter read: "Dear God, are boys better than girls? I know you are one but try to be fair" (Marshall and Hample 1966: n.p.). This brief quote shows how language shapes attitudes and feelings of self-worth. The little girl was internalising messages that to be female was to be inferior to males, and that if the Supreme Being were male, then to be female would definitely be second best. Jann Clanton explores this issue further in relation to language about God:

> Masculine God-language devalues femininity by ignoring
> it. Women receive the subtle message that maleness, since
> it is used for references to God, is worthy of greater respect
> than femaleness. Such a message encourages women to look
> to men as authorities. Females who grow up with language
> that equates God and masculinity learn to sacrifice por-

tions of their own identity for the approval of men (1990: 67).

This is a crucial reason why God-language needs to be inclusive and needs to be transformed. As women we need to affirm that we, equally, are created in the image of God, and to negate the internalised messages in our language.

It is also problematic if people internalise a message that God is white. In the same way, if God is white, then to be black is to be other than God; again – second best. Further, the language in liturgy and worship which refers to the contrast between light and darkness, attaching positive value to light and negative value to darkness, can also be alienating. The message transmitted from society, particularly in South Africa, has been that those of darker complexion are inferior to those of lighter complexion. This in itself has led to enormous problems of self-worth, and to self-hatred, in people of colour. When language in liturgy, then, refers to "the darkness of sin and death" or to God's presence as light[1], for example, this same message is reinforced and the problems of self-worth entrenched. Consequently, for women of colour the issues of self-worth are doubly magnified.

In the same way, if God is heterosexual then lesbians and gays are also devalued and struggle with feelings of self-worth. Desmond Tutu makes a strong statement in this regard:

> The church of Jesus Christ, far from being inclusive and welcoming of all, has over and over again pushed many to the periphery; instead of being hospitable to all, it has made many of God's children outcasts and pariahs on the basis of something which, like race or gender, they could do nothing about - their sexual orientation. The church has joined the world in committing what I consider to be the ultimate blasphemy - making the children of God doubt that they are children of God. Lesbians and gays have been made to reject God and, in their rejection of the church, they have been made to question why God created them as they were (1997: iv).

Nancy Hardesty maintains that using inclusive language makes us more aware of our prejudices and more sensitive to others' sensitivities. This in turn helps us to be more truly the body of Christ, caring for each other as members of one human family. For her, using inclusive language is "a matter of faithfulness to God and to our moral responsibility for our neighbors ... To speak accurately of God and lovingly to our neighbor requires the use of inclusive language. Anything less is a rejection of God's revelation of selfhood and a withholding of

God's gift to the needy, food for the hungry, and cure for the sick" (1987: 15).

Language, therefore, is not only powerful as a tool which can hurt and exclude, it also plays a major role in forming and shaping opinions, attitudes and beliefs. The little girl mentioned above had certainly received a belief message, loud and clear. The people in our faith communities receive the message loud and clear every time they come to worship. The problem lies in the patriarchal roots and patriarchal nature of our faith communities and church traditions. This is what must change.

Patriarchy and language

Patriarchy has been described as being like toxic water within which a fish lives and breathes – so much "the natural environment in which we all live that it is almost impossible to see it" (Hardesty 1987: 16). It can be defined as "a complex social structure built on the simple premise that only the free, propertied male is the citizen" (Procter-Smith 1990: 14). Women, children and slaves only have derived status from the (heterosexual) male within their household. Linked with this is the concept of *androcentrism*, in which the male person is normative, making the female person derivative and Other (ibid: 15).

Procter-Smith maintains that "androcentric reality is constructed and sustained by the subtle means of symbols and language. Language that reflects the assumption that the male is the norm, that 'man' means 'person' and 'person' means 'man', renders women invisible or marginal. Linguistically, women appear as exceptions or problems" (ibid: 16). Thus the English language has, in the past, used the words 'man', 'men' and 'mankind' to denote both man and woman, male or female persons, and humanity. Yet the words 'man' and 'men' can also refer to the male gender specifically, depending on the context. In addition, a general sentence referring to both women and men will, by convention, use male pronouns. For example, the phrase "each one took his shoes off," or "the one who cannot love his brother" is supposed to refer to both male and female persons. This type of language is supposed to be gender-inclusive, that is, to include both men and women in its meaning, but it actually reinforces the patriarchal reality that to be male is to be normative.

It is important to understand, however, that this problem seems not to be experienced in the same way by all people in the Anglican Church where I belong. This is because most African languages used in the Church of the Province of Southern Africa have the same word for the third person singular pronoun for male and female. The word for 'he" or "she" differs only in its contextual use and thus the issues related to inclusive language are a little different. In addition, since English is often a third or fourth language for many people, the nuances of sexist language may not pose problems for them if the words are not heard in the same kind of way. However, it remains an area where

much education is needed and much pain is felt by women, especially English-speaking women.

Although many African languages do not have the same problem, the God-language and the images used to describe God, are still mostly male. But several other languages do have the same problem as English. This reflects the androcentrism to which Procter-Smith refers, and which has become extremely problematic for many women over the past decades – to the point that women feel both enormous pain, and rage, at the exclusion and devaluation evoked by such language. I can remember the pain of exclusion and the anger I felt when, as I have mentioned, colleagues would address a clergy gathering beginning with the words "my brothers in Christ", or when we were required to say a psalm which included the strange phrase "children of the sons of men". It is encouraging, however, that the new Anglican prayer book has managed to change much of the language to be more inclusive.

Patriarchy and God-talk

Patriarchy, as a social system, has communicated the idea that the male is normative so effectively that the logical consequence has been to depict God as male. This is reflected in the language and images used to describe God, as well as the male pronouns used for God. Images of God as Father, King, Lord, as well as the formula of "Father, Son and Holy Spirit", all reinforce this idea. When this language is the language of liturgy and worship, it takes on enormous power to shape attitudes and beliefs. The liturgy of the Eucharist, particularly, in which these same images of God predominate even in the new Anglican prayer book, needs to be more thoroughly examined to see how it can become more inclusive. If this is not done, the experience of women will continue to be alienation. One woman described her feelings as follows:

> I feel as though I am eavesdropping on a conversation labeled 'For Men Only'... That which should have created a sense of wholeness in me made me feel dehumanized, less than a full person. What was meant to be a time of worship of the true God was, for me, a worship of the masculine – the masculine experience among humans and the masculine dimension of God (Emswiler and Emswiler 1974: 6).

Patriarchal theology
The root of the problem is that the theology undergirding the life and worship of most, if not all churches has everything to do with the hierarchical, rigid, authoritarian, traditional, male-dominated structures and praxis. God is seen as

male and all-powerful at the top of a hierarchical structure where male is normative. Creation is also perceived in hierarchical terms with male being superior to female. Jesus's maleness is seen to be normative, with his male disciples paving the way for a male-dominated church, patriarchal in style, culture, and worship. Much of this traditional theology was challenged in the debates on women's ordination; and certainly there are many who find patriarchal theology incompatible with our beliefs.

Yet the patriarchal ways of the church are slow to change. Sometimes I find myself asking whether transformation is even possible. The task of working for change is enormous and requires an immense amount of wisdom and strategising. Although one can often feel paralysed by the overwhelming size of the task, there is much that has been done and that can be done. One way is to look specifically at worship and devise a language about God that attempts to reflect a broader experience and to be more inclusive. We need to explore the way in which God is named and described.

Names and images
The naming of God: God of a thousand names
How does one describe the indescribable? How does one name God, when God is the Divine and we are human, with only the limited tools of human language at our disposal? I affirm Gail Ramshaw's contention that "always in the Judeo-Christian tradition the name of God is mystery" (1988: 151). One could think of Moses's encounter with the Divine and the way in which his quest to know God's name was not answered in the way he sought. God answered Moses but the answer itself remained a mystery: "YHWH," unpronounceable, untranslatable and certainly without gender. For if human language were actually able to describe or name God, it would mean that God could be contained or defined by human language, that God could be understood by human minds. But that would then contradict the meaning of divinity, God becoming, in some way, 'not-God', or not divine. The task of language, then, is to describe the mystery that cannot be described, to "speak faithfully the mystery of God" (ibid: 153). What this means is that any words to describe God will be inadequate and we are reduced to using images or pictures to depict certain aspects of God. In the end, all language which names or describes God can only be metaphoric language. Ramshaw stresses that to forget that "image functions as metaphor" is to be "tricked into a dangerous religious naiveté ... for when images talk of God, they are always metaphors, always alien terms which surprisingly, astonishingly, get juxtaposed to God" (ibid: 154).

Understanding that our names for, and descriptions of, God are metaphors, sheds new light on the type of masculine language and images used to describe God: they are just *one* example of metaphorical language attempting to describe

or name God. In other words, to call God a Father does not mean that God is actually a male being.

We need to use as many images as our imaginations can find to describe the indescribable God. This is because no one image can ever contain who God is. God will always surprise us with another face, one that we had not previously encountered or remotely expected. Carter Heyward said that "in seeing God only in our own colors, shapes, styles and ways of life, we are blinded to God's presence in others' colors, forms and ways of being" (1984: 28). In other words, new images of God must be sought in the most unexpected places. In the end, God is the God who defies description, whose faces are like the infinite faces of a multi-faceted diamond. There can never be too many images for God, as each new image brings us to greater understanding of who God is, while at the same time reminding us that we can never fully know or understand the mystery of God. Therefore the search must be ongoing.

Possibilities of other images from Christian scripture and tradition

There are many images of God found both in Scripture and in the traditions of church history; and more feminine images than have been taught throughout the years. Several of these have been explored and documented.[2] The biblical tradition, in fact, is sprinkled throughout with images for God which enlarge our concept and stretch our imaginations.

Virginia Mollenkott explores feminine images of God thoroughly in her book *The Divine Feminine* (1986). Some of these arise from stories which are familiar, such as Jesus weeping over Jerusalem and likening himself to a mother hen (Matthew 23: 37 and Luke 13: 34). Another powerful image is that of God as mother eagle (Deuteronomy 32: 11 and Job 39: 27–30). Images of God as female pelican or mother bear arise from the Psalms and from Hosea respectively.

Further, images of God as a mother, as a mother in labour, and as nursing mother, are found in Deutero-Isaiah, in chapters 42: 14 and 49: 15. God is also compared with a midwife at the birth process, in Isaiah 66: 9 and in Psalm 22: 10. In addition, Phyllis Trible has suggested that because the Hebrew word *rachum* or *racham*, which is usually translated as "compassion", is closely related to the Hebrew word for womb: *racham* or *rechem*, this means that God's compassion could also be translated as "God's womb-love" (1978: 31–59). Virginia Mollenkott links this to Paul's speech to the Athenian Council of the Areopagus (Acts 17: 26, 28) where he refers to God as having given life and breath to everyone; and declares that we live and move and exist in God (1986: 15–16). She concludes that "Acts 17: 28 can therefore be understood as assurance that all human beings exist not only within the womb, but within the yearning

womb-love, of God the Mother" (ibid: 16).

It is very seldom that one has heard a sermon about God as mother, or been taught that there are feminine images for God in Scripture. But there were many women and men in the tradition of church history – mystics and spiritual writers – who explored the image of God as mother, used it in their prayers, and wrote about their experience of God as mother. When I first read about such people as Dame Julian of Norwich who wrote extensively about Jesus as mother (cited in Mollenkott 1986: 29), as well as about many others in the Middle Ages of whom Caroline Bynum has written in her book *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (1982), I was quite astounded. It was liberating to discover the existence of a historical practice of praying to God as mother. But it also aroused my anger that there is so much in Scripture and tradition that has been ignored by those responsible for teaching the faith, so much that has been unexplored, thus depriving the faith community of a heritage and understanding which would have given a more accurate picture of God.

There is another large source of imagery for God which is female. This is to be found in the wisdom tradition, which has, in recent years, been more fully explored by feminist theologians such as Elizabeth Johnson in *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (1992). Johnson writes of the biblical figure of God as Wisdom as follows:

> the biblical depiction of Wisdom is itself consistently female, casting her as sister, mother, female beloved, chef and hostess, preacher, judge, liberator, establisher of justice, and a myriad of other female roles wherein she symbolizes transcendent power ordering and delighting in the world (ibid: 87).

The person of Wisdom/Sophia is linked with Christ the Wisdom of God, who became not only Logos/Word incarnate but also Sophia/Wisdom incarnate. Johnson develops this, saying that "divine Sophia incarnate in Jesus addresses all persons in her call to be friends of God, and can be truly represented by any human being called in her Spirit, women as well as men" (ibid: 165). I think that this image of God as wisdom, of Christ as divine Sophia, has exciting possibilities for use in developing more inclusive images for God in liturgy and worship.

In fact, there is so much more in Scripture and tradition relating to images of God than can be explored in this chapter.

Images of God in African tradition

The issue of inculturation, or indigenisation, is an issue growing in urgency and importance in South African churches, as they seek to become more truly African. This means that the choice of metaphors used for God in prayers and in liturgy has to be broadened, using the rich cultural heritage of African spirituality. As feminists have sought to include images and metaphors for God that are more feminine, so African liturgists are seeking to use images and metaphors that speak more clearly to Africans (Tovey 1988: 39).

An African worldview could strike a westerner as very different. One of the fundamental differences is an underlying understanding of the connectedness of all life – that all life is sacred, that human beings are connected intrinsically to God, to the land, and to each other. One of the core values undergirding African culture is that of *ubuntu*, related to the saying "*umntu ngumntu ngabantu*". While neither of these can really be translated, the idea conveyed in the saying is that "a person is a person through other persons", meaning that we can know our humanity only through our relationship with others, through our belonging with others. If there is *ubuntu* in society, then there will be right relationships between people as well as between people and the land. *Ubuntu* also underscores the importance of the concept of community and relationality in African culture and worldview, as well as the importance of family, kinship and clan – which includes the 'living dead', the Ancestors.

This holistic concept of humanness rejects the dualisms of the West: for instance, between body and spirit, or the religious and the secular. The African style of prayer arises out of this connectedness of all life. I find myself wondering if there are some linking points here with the theology of feminist theologians such as Carter Heyward, who explores themes of mutual relationality and the interconnectedness and the sacredness of all life. While there are differences in emphasis, I think there is the potential for some exciting interactions between themes in feminist theology and an African worldview, perhaps in the area of liturgy and prayers.

African prayers have been described as having a "characteristic style and urgency which is as redolent and evocative of authentic African worship as it is unfamiliar to Europeans" (Gittins 1985: 10). They can be described as 'traditional' prayers to be understood against their own backgrounds, "prayers which speak powerfully about the earth, produce, sickness, the powers of nature, fertility, death" (ibid: 12). Images of God can be very vivid, such as "Sun too bright for our gaze" (ibid: 17), or literal: "God, piler-up of the great rocks" (Tovey 1988: 37), or metaphorical: "Great Shield" (Gittins 1985: 21). Some images relate directly to African culture, such as "God of the living and the non-living" or "Great Elder". All African languages have their own words for God as Creator of the Universe, the God of all life, God the "Great Spirit"; but none of these words can really be translated while also transmitting all of the

meaning inherent in the original language.

In some cultures, God is thought of as "the Father, the Mother and the Son". A very small number refer to God as "Great Mother", while many cultures refer to God as "Father", "Father of my fathers" or "Grandfather" – mostly in the context of God as creator and provider (Mbiti: 91–93). African culture is, for the most part, patriarchal, thus many of the images for God are masculine or have masculine connotations, such as "Great Elder", "Chief", or "Great Father" (Tovey 1988: 38). In recent attempts at inculturation, Jesus as been described or addressed as "our Brother", "God's Firstborn", or "Ancestor of Ancestors" (ibid). Other explorations describe Jesus as "Master of Initiation", "Chief of Chiefs", "Liberator" and "Healer"[3]. Some of these images are more masculine than others. There is certainly a need for interaction between African feminist theologians and liturgists[4] to explore the possibility of images for God which are both African and also inclusive. This is a task too large for this essay, but one that must remain firmly on the agenda.

Relevant new images?

As I consider the rich sources of imagery in Christian Scripture and tradition and in African culture, I realise that the potential for creating new and fresh images for God is enormous. It is a task that is best done in dialogue with others so that an interaction of voices can be explored. Some of the images and phrases for God which speak to me, as a white South African woman with a European background, may not speak with as much power or clarity as other images, to an African woman. The task of liturgy is somehow to find a wide enough spectrum of images to speak to as broad a range of people as possible. It may be that people will discover new aspects of God as they are exposed to new, culturally different, inclusive, images of God.

What I do in this essay is merely to suggest possibilities for alternatives to the most over-used, worn images, especially those which emphasise the maleness of God. These are images of God as 'Father', 'Lord' and as 'Father, Son and Holy Spirit', which occur most frequently in worship and liturgy. My alternatives will be rather subjective, as they are images which speak to me – sometimes because they are so refreshing after the exclusive masculine language in liturgy, and sometimes because of their theological significance.

Alternatives for God as 'Father'

The obvious alternative to God as father is God as mother. I have found it a personally liberating experience to pray to God as mother: as comforting, nurturing mother, and as motherly strength. I think, however, that one has to be pragmatic in finding images which move people along the way gently, pushing

and prodding them to new thoughts and experiences through the liturgy and the prayers. Thus I think it is easier to use the image of mother if it has other words or adjectives added, perhaps because it makes people feel more comfortable. I particularly like 'Mother of Life', or even 'God who gave us birth', which implies motherhood but does not name God as mother. If one combines this image with African culture, then perhaps 'Mother of the living and the non-living' might be a very new possibility, or 'Great Mother of our ancestors'[5].

Another possible alternative for God as father is God as "our Eternal Parent"[6]. This moves people away from the emphasis on the maleness and fatherhood of God to a point of considering God as more than father. One could also address God as "our Mother and Father", or "our Mother, our Father". These are perhaps little ways in which to take beginning steps towards making liturgy more inclusive.

It should also be noted that some theologians question whether the image of God as parent – whether mother or father – is adequate or always helpful. Sally McFague suggests that this image implies a dependency model: a child depending upon a parent, and that such images need to be balanced with other images which are non-familial and non-gendered (1982: 178). She suggests that the image of God as friend or companion might be more helpful than God as mother or father.

Alternatives for God as 'Lord'

Feminist liturgists have developed many alternatives to the word 'Lord'. These include "Sovereign One" or "the Sovereign", "Holy One", or "Holy Wisdom". I also find it helpful to change "Lord" to "holy God" or "gracious God". I realise that these do not have the same meaning as 'Lord' but part of the problem with the word 'lord' is its connection with the feudal system and the attitude of ownership/servitude – and this is the historical baggage which it carries[7]. I think it is important to change it to something different, but not to drop it completely.

In some liturgies I have seen "Lord" replaced with "Saviour" or "Christ" or "God" – for instance replacing the traditional greeting "The Lord be with you" with "God dwells in you"; and changing "Lord" to "Saviour" at the preface to the gospel so that it reads "The Holy Gospel of our Saviour Jesus Christ according to ...". Another liturgical example is provided at the exchanging of the peace: "the peace of the risen Christ be with you always". These are little changes but extremely important, as they slowly move people away from the predominance of "Lord" in the liturgy, gradually making it at least less masculine and exclusive, if not more directly inclusive.

A new name for the Trinity?

The traditional formula for the trinune God as "Father, Son and Holy Spirit" has undergirded worship and liturgy throughout the history of the Church. This short liturgical phrase is loaded with theological meaning, making efforts to find acceptable alternatives difficult. Much has been written about God as the Trinity – and what I can do in this essay is minimal.

"The Father, Son and Holy Spirit" is used in prayers, at the end of each psalm in Anglican and Roman Catholic liturgy, and in blessings. For me, it is one of the images of God that I find hardest to hear. Some of the earliest alternatives that I came across were "Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer", as well as "Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier". Gail Ramshaw criticises these as a "contemporary formulation of modalism which naively equates one function each to one person each, an idea wholly denied by classical theology" (1988: 207). This same critique would relate to the more recent formulations of "Life-Giver, Pain-bearer, Love-Maker"[8] or "Creator, Redeemer and Giver of Life" in the new prayerbook of the Anglican Church in New Zealand (1989), which I have personally found meaningful. I am not in agreement with Ramshaw that that formulation necessarily denotes separate functions for each of the separate persons of the Godhead. If one bears the theology of mutual relation and community within the Trinity in mind, then one could perhaps manage to maintain the unity-yet-diversity, the oneness-yet-threeness of the traditional formula which in itself is impossible to understand.

Ramshaw is also emphatic in her rejection of the word 'Parent' for 'Father' in the Trinity, as a contradiction of the "shockingly personal revelation of God by Jesus" (1988: 206). She develops a possible alternative in "God, the Abba, the Servant, the Paraclete" (ibid: 210–213), and rewrites the doxology and a blessing using this formula. Although I do think it has theological coherence, I do not find this to be a helpful formulation. It is hidden in theological language which does not communicate meaning directly to the hearer. In particular, the notion of servanthood is rife with political and historical apartheid baggage, which creates difficulties for using the word "servant" at this time in South Africa.

In a later work, Ramshaw cites Augustine's formulation of "the Lover, the Beloved and Love" – which is similar to Carter Heyward's formulation of "God the Lover, the Beloved and the spirit of Love that binds the Lover to her Beloved" (Heyward 1989: 24). Ramshaw also cites Julian of Norwich's "maker, lover and keeper" (1995: 80–81). Her final solution to naming the trinune God, asking "how best can the mystery (of God) be conveyed?", is to talk of the "Triune God" without delineating a threefold formula (ibid: 91).

Nancy Hardesty outlines some additional formulations of the Trinity from Julian of Norwich. Of these, the most helpful for liturgy is that of "Creator, lover and protector" (1987: 55) – which is still a description of function rather

than a personal, relational formula.

Elizabeth Johnson's indepth exploration of the theological issues culminates in the possible image of "Hidden Abyss, Word and Spirit", and claims that Holy Wisdom is like a Trinity itself. She also re-emphasises the point that all language depicting God is analogical, metaphorical, even the language relating to the Trinity (1992: 215–223). The naming of God remains the naming of a mystery – and this is perhaps most clearly seen in attempts to formulate new names for the Trinity.

In exploring various alternatives for the naming of the Trinity, I struggled to find anything that is truly African, truly South African, and truly inclusive. One of the more African ideas I had was 'Great Elder, Great Brother, Great Spirit', but this is too masculine an image to be inclusive. Another is 'Ancestor of ancestors, Friend of friends, Power and Strength', but this is more of an experimental idea than a theologically coherent and consistent representation of the Trinity.

For myself, I find the formulas: 'Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer' and 'Life-Giver, Pain-Bearer, Love-Maker' acceptable enough as alternatives, not necessarily completely theologically adequate, but very helpful as images for public prayer. At least they provide some alternative inclusive language, which makes people think differently as they hear the different formulations.

Conclusions

If the church is to change, be transformed – and be a part of the transformation process in South Africa – then there must be exploration of these themes. In the preceding section I have attempted to survey possible alternative imagery for God, some of which is feminist, some of which is African, not enough of which is both. I have put forward a few suggestions which are just that: suggestions to spark some debate at a more collective level. They need to be tested with other women, other South Africans, other liturgists and theologians. They need to be discussed by a diverse group who can work collectively to take further steps in developing the imagery used in liturgy. All the suggestions need to be tried out in practice and then re-worked.

Language in worship and liturgy has great power: to heal or to hurt, to empower or to alienate, to shape and form attitudes, to welcome or to exclude, and to transform. This is particularly true of language used about God, and addressed to God in public prayer. In much liturgy and worship the language and imagery for God is traditional, patriarchal and excluding. Such traditional language and imagery is over-used and worn out, no longer meaningful to people in a diverse contemporary society where many no longer attend church or understand religious language. It is excluding and alienating by virtue of its male-centredness, and this has caused many women to leave their churches. It

also reflects more of our colonial past than our emerging reality as an African church.

As part of the ongoing process of transformation, therefore, there is an urgent need for new and fresh language about, and imagery for, God to be explored for use in liturgy and worship. In particular, there is a heart-rending cry from women to feel included and welcomed in the language of worship and liturgy in their churches. Then the bountiful riches, the infinite depths, the wonder and the mystery of God can be more fully discovered, permeating the worship life of South African Christians in an including, welcoming, gender-sensitive church of greater integrity.

Notes

1   An *Anglican Prayer Book* (1989: 125)
2   See Mollenkott (1986). For a very thorough elaboration on feminine images of God in Scripture, in church tradition, especially Julian of Norwich, see Sebastian (1995).
3   See the particular chapters in Schreiter (1991).
4   African feminist theologians such as Mercy Oduyoye and Teresa Hinga, among others, have written about African women's experience of Christ. The liturgical debate also continues within the African regional liturgical commission of the Anglican Communion.
5   These are my own tentative suggestions.
6   An African Prayer Book (1995: 64)
7   For a concise review of the linguistic history of the word 'lord', see Gail Ramshaw, (1996: 36)
8   This formulation was originated by Jim Cotter (1983) in *Prayer at Night*. London: SPCK, p. 42.

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