

**2017 LANGUAGE GUIDELINES FOR SASKATCHEWAN CONFERENCE**

(These guidelines have been revised from the 1993 and the 2010 Language Guidelines of Saskatchewan Conference)

**Preface**

The hope is that these guidelines will increase our awareness of biases in the English language. We recognize that language as a means of communication is always evolving. These guidelines represent one further step along this journey. As we strive to become an intercultural church, we need to continue in the struggle to ensure that our language is inclusive, just and life affirming. We are also aware that the respect and courtesy with which we use language are as important as the words themselves.

Awareness of language has been a priority for Saskatchewan Conference for well over two decades. This commitment to language has led us to affirm the following principles:

**Theological Affirmations**

Each person embodies the spirit of the Divine.

The church is called to be a liberating, creative and healing force. We are called to challenge the boundaries assumed in language.

The prophetic voice of the church is ineffective and contradictory if its language is inaccurate, outdated or biased. The church, as an agent of justice, should lead our society in attempts to change such language.

In our decision making as a church we must be ever mindful of the needs of oppressed individuals and groups.

**Basic Assumptions**

- ❖ Language has power. It shapes and informs our impressions of reality by transmitting not only facts and ideas, but also emotions and values. Language is basic to learning.
- ❖ Language shapes our attitudes and helps to create and maintain stereotypes. It subtly influences people into accepting roles, positions and status which can contribute to division and alienation within the human community.
- ❖ Language can be a creative, liberating force or a captive, oppressing force. Language expresses our shared assumptions and is a major part of all liberation struggles.
- ❖ Language can be exclusive, oppressive, sexist, racist, violent, patronizing, hurtful, arrogant and can include assumptions about power, possession and relationships.
- ❖ Language changes. What we find acceptable today may not be at some point in the future.

**LANGUAGE THAT AFFIRMS:****ABILITY**

Words can be paternalistic or degrading when describing people whose physical or mental abilities may be challenged through birth, accident or illness. There is a tendency to assume that such people are less than whole. Language based upon justice, rather than charity, promotes dignity and independence.

1. “Disability” is a general term for a permanent or semi permanent condition that may interfere with a person’s capacities. That condition may be physical, mental or sensory in nature. In descriptive language, the person is more important than the condition. Terms which people with disabilities have identified as problematic include “the disabled”, “handicapped”, “the crippled”, and “the invalid”. Some people prefer the term “differently abled” rather than “disabled”. If using clinical descriptions, we should keep up to date.
2. Seek language that presents a positive appreciation of the person. Say that a person “uses a wheelchair” rather than indicating a person “is confined to a wheelchair”. “Pity” language may be offensive. Do not define the person by their disability.
3. People with disabilities who have accomplished or achieved special recognition prefer not to have the disability sensationalized. All people have a variety of gifts to offer.
4. Many people with serious or lengthy illnesses or conditions, such as cancer, multiple sclerosis or HIV/AIDS prefer to be referred to as “people living with...” rather than being described as “afflicted with...” or “victims of...”
5. Avoid using language that implies mental disability such as “crazy,” “insane,” or “nuts” to describe people and/or ideas.

**AGE**

People’s knowledge or capabilities cannot be prejudged on the basis of age. Stereotypes of age groups divide people and deny them individuality.

1. Idealizing any age group is inaccurate, and can lead to destructive stereotypes. People in all age groups have valuable contributions to make and challenges to face. It is inaccurate to make assumptions about the capabilities, opinions or values of any age group. For example, “the older people do not like change”, “children can’t understand that” or “old people don’t enjoy that”. As well, remarks such as “little old lady” and “you’re too young to understand” are condescending.
2. “Girl” refers to a female person of pre-teen years. Teenagers generally prefer “youth” rather than “boys and girls”. References to adults as either “girls” or “boys” are inappropriate.
3. The term “elder” is a term of respect bestowed upon some members of a community. People of a variety of ages may be elders within a community.

**CLASS**

Language can become a vehicle of social control when some people are portrayed as superior to others because of financial resources, education, occupation or family background. If, as a church, we portray different forms of elitism, people may be silenced because they are afraid of seeming to be less eloquent, competent or intelligent.

## Economic Elitism

1. Language needs to reflect that human worth is not measured in terms of economic status or employment.
2. It is offensive to say either directly or by implication, that poverty is deserved.
3. Use terms such as “economically poor” or “economically oppressed” when referring to people, groups or countries that have insufficient financial resources. Rather than referring to countries as underdeveloped or “third world” we might use the term “developing countries”. Many countries are highly developed and rich in ways other than economic or technological.

## Educational Elitism

1. Strive to use clear, direct language that speaks to the intended audience.
2. Be aware that some language may exclude those without education in a specific area of expertise. Be prepared to teach and/or to learn in such a situation.
3. Theological, technical or organizational terms should only be used when the information is relevant. The speaker should be prepared to explain such terms when they are used. Jargon (terminology that relates to a specific activity, profession or group, developed as a kind of shorthand to quickly express ideas that are frequently discussed among members of a group) often puts down or excludes those who have not been initiated into the language used by a particular group.
4. People who are not using the latest technology are not “backward”.
5. Academic titles should only be used when that information is relevant.
6. Lack of formal education is not synonymous with ignorance, illiteracy, or lack of intelligence. Ways should be found to acknowledge and honour educational experiences other than academic.

## Geographic Elitism

1. Language that demeans residents of certain geographic locations, such as “country hicks” or “city slickers”, is derogatory.
2. It is also offensive to refer to sparsely populated places as “the boonies” or “the sticks.” This assumes that cities and densely populated areas are the norm.

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GENDER

Current understandings no longer see gender as binary. Some who were assigned a male gender at birth identify as female and some who were assigned a female gender at birth identify as male. Others do not claim to be either male or female and might refer to themselves as gender queer or gender fluid.

Our language needs to express our openness to individuals identifying themselves.

The breadth of human experience is denied by gender biases contained in language which prescribes culturally approved roles for women and men. The male-oriented language of our culture particularly denies any experience that is not male.

### Overcoming Male-Oriented Language

1. Language should clearly indicate that people of any gender are involved in the accomplishments of the human race, and that jobs and positions are not limited.
  - “farmers and their wives” could read “farmers” or “those involved in farming”
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2. Use people’s names. Reference to someone’s wife, mother, or daughter without a name suggests that the woman has no identity except as related to another.
  - Use “Robert and Alice Smith”, “Robert Smith and Alice Jones”, or “Robert Smith and his partner, Alice Jones” rather than “Robert Smith and his wife” or “Mr. and Mrs. Robert Smith”.
3. The autonomy of women is discounted when they are identified entirely by their relationship to men. The use of terms Mrs. and Miss identifies women according to their marital status. It is preferable to use only the woman’s first and last name without a title.
4. Substitutes can be found for problem words such as the following:
  - use “ancestors” or “forebears” for “forefathers”
  - use “humankind” or “humanity” rather than “mankind”
  - use “chair” or “chairperson” rather than “chairman”
  - In some cases, terms which describe the function are helpful, such as “firefighters”, “flight attendants” and “mail carriers”.
5. Be aware that all genders share in emotional and moral roles. All genders may need care and protection, all can be spiritually and morally strong. Seek ways to show all genders in strong, independent and nurturing roles.
6. Be aware than an individual may identify with a variety of sexual and gender identities: straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and queer. If possible, it would be respectful to ask individuals how they would want to be named, if at all.

### Overcoming Binary Gender Language

1. Avoid dividing groups by gender such as “brothers and sisters”. Use “siblings”, “friends”.

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2. Avoid calling for hymn verses or liturgy sections to be sung/read by “men” or “women”. Rather, use “left side”, “right side”, or “front” and “back”.
3. Pronouns are important. Ask people for their preference as to what pronoun they would like used in referring to them. “They” is an accepted pronoun for an individual.
4. In dealing with trans people, use their chosen name, not the name they were assigned at birth.

Note: Naming a person’s gender may not be necessary on Conference forms such as those used for Registration at the Annual Meeting. Avoid asking for any information that is not necessary. Forms could ask for the pronoun individuals want to use in reference to themselves and such pronouns could be added to the person’s name tag.

## **INCLUSIVENESS**

Hierarchical thinking is based on an assumption that everything is organized on a model of domination and submission. It assumes that people and structures are, and need to be, organized vertically rather than horizontally. This kind of thinking is encouraged and maintained by using “high low” and “up down” imagery in our language. It images pyramids rather than circles.

Some language could also be described as “maternalistic”, “paternalistic” or “condescending”. Sometimes, a particular bias may be implied although it may be unspecified and vague, but no less problematic – for example, “don’t worry your head about that dear”. People do not appreciate being “talked down to” – it always implies a sense of superiority on behalf of the speaker, which is demeaning to the person or group being referred to or addressed.

1. Phrases such as “climbing the ladder of success”, “top dog”, and “moving up”, imply a hierarchical power structure. Speaking “down to their level” implies that those who use a less complex language are “beneath” those who use language that is more complex. Job changes do not need to be described as “promotions” or “demotions”.
2. The words “high” and “low” often make a value judgment upon something or someone. For example “The Moderator and the General Secretary are the highest officials in the church”.
3. The terms “headquarters” or “head office” are not always an accurate description. In the United Church the term General Council Office should be used. The organization of the United Church is not meant to be hierarchical, but is based upon a conciliar model. This conciliar structure assigns different areas of authority to groups within the various courts of the church (official board, presbyteries, conferences, and the General Council). It is inaccurate to refer to decisions as “coming down from head office”.

## **RELATIONSHIP**

### Possessive

Possessive language misuses power in our relationship when it implies that something or someone is exclusively under our authority.

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1. By referring to something as “my” the speaker or writer is exercising a certain amount of control over the object. In some cases, such as someone referring to their shoes, this may be appropriate, but in others it serves to stake out claimed territory and alienate the listener or reader: “I will not tolerate that on my board” or “this is my kitchen”.
2. Possessive statements may convey a condition of control which does not or should not exist. “My secretary” may more accurately be “our pastoral charge’s secretary”. “My delegate” is properly “Tumbleweed United Church’s delegate”, as the delegate is accountable to the congregation and not to the order of ministry person. To say “our pastoral charge” displays a sharing of ownership more clearly than to say “my pastoral charge”.
3. Often the tone used can differentiate between a statement of relationship and a statement of possessive control: “I’d like you to meet my children” may sound quite different than “These are my children – and I’ll discipline them however I want”.

#### We/They

We/they language implies that the people being referred to are “out there” and not in “our midst”.

1. Care needs to be taken to ensure that people’s life experiences and situations are acknowledged. To say “We pray for those who are poor” implies that none of “us” is poor. It is more appropriate to say “we pray for all who live in poverty, in our own midst and in our world.” When talking in a group about abused women it is not helpful to refer to “them”: This assumes that no abused woman is present.
2. The use of we/they language creates polarities. “We” often refers to the majority view, the norm, while “they” are defined as the minority, the different ones. Such polarities often lead to judgmental attitudes and behaviours.

## RACE AND ETHNICITY

All people share a common humanity. Cultural and racial differences are to be affirmed. Reference to race or nationality should be made only when it is important to the sense of the material and is not patronizing or derogatory. Different is beautiful!

1. Generalizing one feature to all members of a racial or ethnic group is inappropriate. It is derogatory to suggest that the members of any one racial or ethnic group are all receiving welfare or are terrorists. It is false to suggest that any one racial or ethnic group are all athletic or mathematically skilled. Jokes based upon stereotypical assumptions are unacceptable.
2. Racial and ethnic groups should be referred to accurately and respectfully, using terms preferred by each group.
  - The terms First Peoples and First Nations are interchangeable. The terms First Peoples or Aboriginals in Canada are normally broader terms than First Nations, as they include Inuit, Métis and First Nations. First Nations (most often used in the plural) has come into general use for the [Indigenous peoples of North America](#) located in [Canada](#), and their descendants, who are neither Inuit nor Métis. First Nations person is being supplanted by members of various nations referring to themselves by their group or national identity. In conversation this would be as "I am Dakota," or "we are Cree," in recognition of their

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First Nations ethnicities. In the Constitution Act of Canada, passed in 1982, "Aboriginal peoples of Canada" includes the Indian, Inuit and Métis peoples of Canada.

- Indian remains in place as the legal term used in the [Canadian Constitution](#), its usage outside such situations can be considered offensive. Aboriginals is more commonly used to describe all Indigenous peoples of Canada. It also refers to self-identification of Aboriginal people who live within Canada claiming rights of Sovereignty or Aboriginal title to lands.
- The term Eskimo has [pejorative](#) connotations in Canada and Greenland. Indigenous peoples have replaced the term Eskimo with Inuit. The Yupik of Alaska and Siberia do not consider themselves Inuit, and ethnographers agree they are a distinct people. They prefer the terminology Yupik, YUPIIT, or Eskimo. The [Yupik languages](#) are linguistically distinct from the [Inuit languages](#). Linguistic groups of Arctic people have no universal replacement term for Eskimo, inclusive of all Inuit and Yupik people across the geographical area inhabited by the Inuit and Yupik peoples.

3. Acknowledge the diversity of culture and lifestyle amongst people of the same racial or ethnic background.
4. Use realistic pictures and illustrations which show people with the physical characteristics of their race. Use positive examples of women and men from all racial and ethnic backgrounds. Depict people and their cultures with historical accuracy.
5. Use language which is descriptive rather than judgmental in reference to all races and ethnic groups. All groups possess unique and valued civilizations and can contribute to solving the world's problems. Terms such as "civilized" and "uncivilized" in international references are judgmental.
6. Accents and dialects are part of the uniqueness of individuals. Patience and careful listening may be required to achieve understanding.
7. Colour should be used as a non judgmental adjective. "White" does not equal beautiful, clean, pure or virtuous. "Black" does not equal dirty, evil, or menacing. "Flesh tone" should refer to a range of skin colours.
8. Be aware that publications considered authoritative in any field were written from a particular perspective. These writings may not have taken into consideration the interests and contributions of groups of people that were less powerful at the time of writing (e.g. racial and ethnic groups and women)

## VARYING RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

Responsible use of language conveys respect for people of varying religious beliefs. This respect does not imply endorsement of other religious views or suggest that all criticism is unacceptable. It does mean, however, that religious biases prompted by prejudice, ignorance or hatred need to be avoided.

1. Be as precise as possible in describing teachings, practices and the history of other faiths. References to "pagan" or "heathen" are derogatory, unless specifying ancient religions which call themselves Pagan.

2. Characterizations of people based solely on the religious faith dominant in their native land are inappropriate. Not all East Indians are Hindu.
3. To suggest that God works only through the Christian church creates a sense of superiority. It also implies that anyone else is “against” God. Our language in reference to scripture is evolving. For example we refer to “Hebrew Scriptures” or “First Testament” rather than “Old Testament” which can imply that old is lesser. We also might refer to “Second Testament” rather than “New Testament” to emphasize that revelation of the Divine continues.

## VARIETIES OF FAMILIES

Patriarchal oppression has been condoned through the structure of the nuclear family. When talking about families, we often assume that they consist of Mom, Dad and 2.2 kids, with the man as head of the household. Using terminology such as “head of the house” and “boss” in reference to a man in the family encourages domination over women and children.

We need to acknowledge the variety of families that exist, besides the nuclear family. For instance, there are single parent families, families with two parents (of either same or other gender), families with no children, blended families, extended families and self-declared families. Our language should be inclusive of all types of family arrangements.

Care must be taken not to intrude upon someone’s private life with seemingly innocent questions or labels.

1. Many organizations are no longer using the term “mother and daughter” banquets, as a child may not be raised by a mother. Invitations for children to “bring their Mom and Dad” imply that they live with their mother and father. Children who do not live with both or either may feel inferior or excluded. Instead, invite children to bring their parents or adult friends.
2. It is important to be sensitive about labels. Many people use the term “partner” or “companion” instead of husband, wife or spouse, as this term is not exclusive to married couples.
3. Asking someone “when are you going to get married?” implies that they wish to get married. In some places, lesbian and gay partners cannot legally marry. Many other people choose to remain single.
4. Asking someone “when are you going to have kids?” implies that they want or are able to have children. Saying “it’s too bad that you don’t/can’t have kids” implies that they do want children. It is inappropriate to make assumptions for others.
5. Don’t assume that everyone’s family unit is made up of a male and a female parent. There could be one or two males or one or two females or parents who identify as genderqueer or other genders..

**NON VIOLENCE**

Societal violence is reflected in and encouraged in our use of violent language. Jokes or imagery which include violence carry with them an underlying threat, and are based upon the reality of such violence. Our words sometimes sanction certain forms of violence and abuse.

1. Expressions of anger or frustration which contain violent threats such as “Sometimes I’d like to strangle those kids” are neither amusing nor appropriate.
2. Violent expressions are sometimes used when power and control is maintained or regained such as: “I’m going to hammer this into your head” or “Go out there and clobber the other team”. Be aware that abuse often happens when someone is trying to maintain or regain control over someone else. Language which reflects this should be eliminated.
3. Jokes or humorous comments about violence make light of serious situations, such as “Did you give her a tune-up?”
4. Comments such as “she needs a good licking” imply that physical abuse of family members is “deserved” and acceptable for certain reasons. Abuse is never deserved or “asked for”.

**UNDERSTANDINGS OF GOD**

As finite as we humans are, it may be arrogant to assume that we can contemplate the Infinite adequately enough to name it and speak truths about it. However, we humans have always tried to do just that.

Language about the Holy continually changes. Terminology about God which uses exclusively or predominantly masculine words and images distorts and limits our understanding of God. If all people are created in God’s image, then language about God ought to incorporate both male and female references. Encourage inclusive language in liturgical and devotional material when referring to God or to people. Prayers and liturgies should include a variety of images of God.

Theologians are exploring non-theist images and language to describe the Holy. With the juxtaposition of theology and cosmology come new considerations of the Holy Mystery and use of language to reflect a “non-theistic God”. For some, God is not a supernatural entity, but the essence of life and love that is in the world and within each of us. Another option for the word God might be Creative Energy, the state of Being, the prime spark in every human, unconditional love, ultimate reality or Holy Mystery.

Approved by the Saskatchewan Conference Executive at its meeting of May 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup>, 2017.