Inclusive Language

MCC Inclusive Language Policy and Guidelines, 1981
The Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches is committed to inclusivity in its life and faith.

In the 1970′s and 1980′s, the issue of inclusive language (in worship, scriptures, publications, speech) came to the forefront of the whole Christian Church and to the attention of the Universal Fellowship. In 1979, the Board of Elders appointed an Inclusive Language Task Force whose report to the 1981 General Conference in Houston, Texas, was passed overwhelmingly after some amendments were made. That final report forms the policy base for the Universal Fellowship and its local churches regarding the use of inclusive language. Major portions of that report are presented below.

Why Inclusive Language?

The reason we need to find and use inclusive language in our church life has been widely misunderstood. Inclusive language has often been urged upon congregations on the ground that the use of traditional, exclusive language upsets and angers some who then avoid the church. As Christians, we need to be concerned about the feelings of others; however, if the only reason we use inclusive language is that it keeps some people from getting upset, then what of those who find the use of inclusive language disturbing because of its unfamiliarity? The principle which guides the life and practice of the church cannot be 'what do most people find comfortable,' but rather, 'what is God's will and purpose?' The reason we need to use inclusive language is not because we want to keep a particular group happy, but because it is necessary to promote justice, reconciliation and love, the agenda to which we Christians have been called.

A WORLD OF DIVISION

Because of human sin, we live in a world of division and oppression. Groups which have traditionally exercised control over other groups inevitably and often unconsciously seek to preserve that superior status by denying the same access to power and privilege to others that they themselves enjoy. Such denial may be blatant in the form of discriminatory laws or customs, or it may be hidden but even more potent in the form of oppressive concept or language. The insidious nature of language which serves to emphasize one group as the norm or standard is that it reinforces that group's primacy and importance every time we think or speak, thus, it becomes automatic or 'natural' to ascribe greater weight to that group. Justice, reconciliation and love demand that we overcome oppression wherever it exists and we cannot exclude the oppressive structures of our language from this task.

WIDENING OUR HEARTS

The use of inclusive language does more than overcome a barrier to equal access. It frees us to grasp and convey the wider truth. Paul urged the Corinthians to widen their hearts that they might fully experience

the gospel (II Cor. 6:13). In the same spirit, we are urged to widen our understanding so that we might better grasp the richness and fullness of God as well as of our own humanity. It is our openness to move beyond comfortable and familiar images that enables us to grow in our relationship with God. The importance of inclusive language is that it serves to liberate everyone.

NOT SIMPLE

Language is not as simple as it might first appear. How we speak about something not only describes the experience, but often shapes and creates it. The power and significance of language, words, the word, was clearly understood by the authors of Scripture who identified the act of creation with God's Word, God's speaking. The imagery of God's interaction with humanity is consistently expressed in terms of God's Word or speaking. The early prohibition against uttering God's name was a recognition of the power that a name or word holds. Indeed, God's delegating to humanity the authority to name the creatures was an act of empowerment. Thus, when we deal with language in general and God language in particular, we are venturing into an area of the deepest significance and it is important that we proceed with care and with caution.

CHANGE IS CONSTANT

Both the Biblical tradition and the history of the faith community reveal that the one constant in God language is that of change. And how could it be otherwise? For it is a living God whom we worship and respond to. Both as individuals and as communities our understanding and experience of this God grows as we grow and growth inevitably brings change.

The Bible in its present form evolved over a period of many centuries. Beginning as stories of faith passed on by word of mouth from generation to generation, these stories were eventually written down and added to. Different generations of faith communities shaped, edited and retold these stories in light of their own understanding and experience of God. Still other communities later on discussed and debated which stories and which versions would be included as scripture and which would not.

RETELLING THE STORIES

It is not surprising then, that we, in our age, following the tradition of our ancestors in the faith, are retelling and reshaping the great stories of faith in light of our own experience and our own understanding of that same living God. Such a restatement is a particular hallmark of any prophetic age, when God calls us into wider understandings of old truths and relationships in light of changing events and experience. It was the reformulation of the faith by the prophets in response to the destruction of Israel that renewed that faith. It was the restatement of the law in the life and teachings of Jesus that fulfilled that law. It was the re- interpretation of who is the faith community by Paul that laid the foundation for an inclusive and universal church.

GOD IS NOT LIMITED

The changes that these guidelines represent are in the interest of enlarging and expanding our understanding and experience of God. By no longer identifying God with words or concepts primarily or

exclusively associated with one gender, one race, one group, we more faithfully witness to the nature of a God who is not limited to one gender, one race, or one group.

The fact that such a change is neither familiar nor comfortable for many of us does not mean that we need not expend the effort. Allowing our lives to be transformed by the power of God often involves our submitting to changes that we initially resist.

The work of learning to restate the traditional formulations of our faith in light of God's present Word is no less than other communities of faith have had to do before us. Indeed, to be part of such an emerging restatement of God's Word is not a burden, but a sacred privilege.

DEFINITIONS
What is inclusiveness?
Inclusiveness is an attitude of mutuality and openness toward others that recognizes everyone's right of equal access to the experience and realization of wholeness and it is a commitment to remove barriers between individuals and among communities that deny such access.

What is inclusive language?
Inclusive language reflects an attitude of mutuality and openness toward others that recognizes everyone's right of equal access to the experiences and realization of wholeness. Inclusive language reflects a sensitivity to overcome barriers that exist between individuals and among communities in such areas as gender, race, class, age, physical differences, nationality, theological beliefs, culture and lifestyle.

GUIDELINES FOR GENDER
A. References to people:
A.1 Use non-gendered terms or inclusive gendered terms when referring to all sexes.
A.2 Pronouns should not be of a single gender when referring to all sexes.
A.3 Terms for occupations and roles should not refer to one gender.
B. Inclusive language for God:
B.1 Use non-gendered or inclusive gendered terms for God wherever such changes do not alter the fundamental meaning. If gendered term is used, terms of the other gender should be used for balance.
B.2 Balance male images for God with female images.

B.3 Where possible, replace pronouns with non-gendered nouns, or use balanced gendered pronouns or words such as 'who', 'whom', 'one', and 'God-self.'

C. Inclusive language for Jesus, the Christ:
The historical person, Jesus, was male. The historical fact that Jesus was male affirms not that God chose to become incarnate with masculine characteristics, but that Jesus is fully human as well as fully divine. And because Jesus incorporates the humanity of both men and women, it is appropriate to emphasize the full humanity rather than primarily the maleness of Jesus.

D. Use direct address, adjectives and verbs to replace nouns or pronouns, carefully considering whether meaning or purpose would be adversely changed.

GUIDELINES FOR RACE

If we are indeed going to be an inclusive church, we must acknowledge that we are the product of our past. Incorporated within our Christian religious heritage is a long history of racism (conscious and unconscious). Racism, whether conscious or unconscious, is destructive and must be overcome in order for us to be whole in our Christian faith. So, in keeping with our guidelines for inclusivity, we strongly recommend the elimination of racist language, imagery and symbols in references to people, God, Jesus Christ, scripture, hymns, song, liturgy and contemporary language.

"The paradox of Christianity is that what is wisdom to reason is foolishness to God, and what seems foolish or irrational to reason is the true wisdom that leads to redemption. The darkness from which reason flees is the true path to truth and being. This is the constant teaching of the scriptures. The greatest redemptive acts in the history of salvation were done at night or in darkness of Faith." [The Dark Center: A Process Theology of Blackness , Bulalia Baltazar, Paulist Press, New York, 1973. page 162-3]

We are troubled by the confusion of the issues of pigmentation (white, black) and illumination (light, dark). Because of its racism, society has so strongly interwoven the two. In a technical and a theological sense, they are indeed separate issues whereas, in their practical application, they are often combined. We need to be especially careful of how we use terms of lightness and darkness.

A LIFETIME COMMITMENT

We recommend that:

· inclusive language be introduced in membership classes;

· these guidelines be applied at all levels of the life of UFMCC, in written, visual and spoken form, on the local, national and international levels;

· candidates for pastoral leadership and deacons serve as examples to others by following these guidelines.

Very significantly for all of us in UFMCC, these guidelines have been used in the editing of our Statement of Faith as we know it today.

The clergy and lay delegates of the 10th General Conference recognized that:

1) local churches are entrusted to use and adapt these guidelines for local use and that

2) the work of education and consciousness-raising is a lifetime commitment for all of us.

Finally, the Inclusive Language policy of the University Fellowship is not written in stone — our understanding of what it means to be inclusive must continue to evolve.