

## Voices Together Hymn Sing Blueprint:

# Exploring Gendered Images of God in *Voices Together*

**Note to the leader:** This hymn festival explores a breadth of gendered language for God that is included in *Voices Together*. It draws on the resource [Expansive Language in Voices Together: Gendered Images of God](#) to shape a service of worship that invites experiential encounter with expansive imagery as much as analysis or discussion of it.

## GATHERING

### Opening Song

“Bring Many Names” VT #134

### Call to Worship

“To worship is to stand in awe” VT #855

### Welcome and Introduction

*Voices Together* includes diverse images of God. Word, Breath, Rock, Creator, Spirit, Gardener, Everlasting Love, Fiery Force, and many other images of God are not gendered. At the same time, some of the most striking images of God—in new, revised, and retained songs and resources—do use gendered language.

*Voices Together* takes the approach of expanding the images for God beyond those in previous Mennonite hymnals while also retaining familiar images. In the same book, and sometimes even on the same page, God is named with feminine and masculine pronouns, and described with male and female images, among many ungendered metaphors.

The choices made in *Voices Together* will prompt a range of responses—joy, grief, alarm, relief, confusion, and more. Since a variety of approaches to language are used, it is unlikely anyone will be satisfied with every decision. The hymnal is not intended to cater to one person or community, but instead is meant to serve the diversity within Mennonite Church USA and Mennonite Church Canada by supporting faithful worship that is true to the God we encounter in Scripture, the Anabaptist tradition, and our daily lives.

We invite you to inhabit these tensions this evening, to be present to what is uncomfortable and challenging, as well as what is comforting and liberating. Within and beyond these words and images, we trust that God is present within us and among us. “Worship is the mystery within us, reaching out to the Mystery beyond” (VT 855).

## PRAISING

### Song

“Praise, My Soul, the King of Heaven!” VT #75

### Commentary: Why Expansive Language?

There are three main reasons why *Voices Together* takes an expansive approach to imagery for God: who God is, who we are, and who God calls us to become.

Read or summarize page 2 of [Expansive Language in Voices Together: Gendered Images of God](#)

For these three reasons, *Voices Together* takes an expansive, case-by-case expansive approach to shaping language for worship. For example, a largely unchanged text like “Praise, My Soul, the King of Heaven” retains the images of “Father” and “King” as well as he/him pronouns for God. This is placed alongside a text with a small revision that has a big impact, a shift from he/him to she/her pronouns for God in “O Worship Our God, All Glorious Above.” This diversity of imagery is present not only in the selection and revision of traditional texts, but also in Contemporary Worship Music, global song, and other musical idioms introduced in *Voices Together*.

### Songs

“O Worship Our God, All Glorious Above” VT #74

“How Great Is Our God” VT #116

*If you are feeling creative, these songs could be combined in a medley.*

## PROCLAIMING GOD’S WORD

### Scripture Reading

Proverbs 8:1-30 (excerpts) VT #184

### Song

“Come and Seek the Ways of Wisdom” VT #196

### Commentary: Diverse Images of God in Scripture

Decisions about the language we use in worship ought not be driven by the personal preferences of leaders, a desire to be politically correct, or the loudest or majority voices in a community. Instead, we can make choices anchored in core theological convictions, thoughtful reflection, and ongoing learning about who God is, who we are as individuals and communities, and who we are called to become in the decades ahead.

Specifically, an expansive approach to images of God is anchored in the Bible. The *Voices Together: Worship Leader Edition* includes a resource that lists scriptural names for God to help leaders address God in prayer in ways that are anchored in Scripture yet expand our language and images for God. This list is not intended to be comprehensive, but is rather a place to begin.

*List a few examples that will resonate in your community.*

All language is metaphorical. Words indicate objects and concepts; words are not the objects and concepts themselves. Metaphors work by indicating both similarity and difference. The language and metaphors we use for God, including those from the Bible, always point both to who God is and to who God is not. God is both like and not like a king, a rock, or a mother.

Language is always connected to culture. What words mean in one language and culture is often difficult to translate into another. For example, the meanings of “king” and “mother” in biblical settings are both similar to and different from the meanings of these words in modern democracies and family structures. In addition, languages use gender in different ways. In certain languages, including biblical Greek and Hebrew, all nouns have genders. In present-day English, gender is used only for persons and other living creatures. In some other languages, it is not necessary to use gendered language for persons. *Voices Together* navigates these issues in the context of the English language in twenty-first-century North American culture.

Many of the images of God in Scripture are not gendered. Although these images have often been paired with male pronouns for God in the history of the Christian tradition, this is not required. One text commissioned for *Voices Together* integrates a beautiful array of Biblical images of God while employing she/her pronouns. These non-maternal images were specifically selected to expand on the mothering imagery often associated with using feminine images of God.

## **Song**

“We Long to Know Her” VT #44

## **Scripture Introduction**

The Bible includes images of God as a woman, although these images have often been overlooked in the history of the Christian tradition. In the Gospel of Luke, chapter 15, Jesus tells a series of three parables: the parable of the lost sheep, the parable of the lost coin, and the parable of the prodigal son. While there are many songs that develop the images of God as shepherd and loving father, the image of God as a woman searching for a lost coin is far less common in church music, leading to creation of a song based on this Biblical text for *Voices Together*.

## Scripture Reading

Luke 15:8-10

[Jesus told them this parable]: What woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

## Song

"God Lights A Lamp" VT #299

## Song Introduction

Introducing expansive images of God, such as the image of God as a woman searching for a lost coin from Luke 15:8-10, does not mean losing familiar images of God, such as God as a loving Father from Luke 15:11-32. These images can coexist.

## Song

"Children of the Heavenly Father" VT #517

## RESPONDING IN PRAYER

### Commentary: Personal Reflection

Our personal experiences shape how we experience different images of God. Take a moment to reflect on the following questions.

- 1) What is an image of God that has sustained you, especially in difficult times? For whom might this image be challenging?

*Silence.*

- 2) What is an image of God that is challenging for you personally, and why? For whom might this image be life-giving?

*Silence.*

- 3) What new image of God has delighted you? What is an image of God that has surprised you and opened new possibilities?

*Silence.*

As you reflect on these questions, consider how you can learn from those in your community who may be marginalized because of their gender.

God gathers us in prayer as together we shelter under God's wings and "recount all our frail human hopes, the dreams of young, and stories of old." As we pray for ourselves, those

dear to us, and for the needs of the world, God is present to us in ways that meet us where we are.

### **Song**

“Ngayong nagdadapit hapon (When Twilight Comes)” VT #501

### **Prayer**

“With the whole people of God” VT #997

*Adapt this prayer for the occasion, drawing on some of the possibilities noted.*

### **Prayer Jesus Taught**

Now let us join our voices in the prayer that Jesus taught us, in whatever version or language is closest to our hearts. Six of many options are found at #989.

### **Sung Prayer Jesus Taught**

“Our God In Heaven” VT #673

## **SENDING**

### **Parting Words**

Expanding our theological imaginations with the language and images we use for God is a journey not a destination. In the years ahead, local congregations and the wider church will continue to explore ways to use gendered and non-gendered language for God in worship as we discover new dimensions of who we are and who God calls us to become. We trust God’s Spirit is gathering us together and leading us on this journey.

### **Song**

“Womb of Life and Source of Being” VT #112

### **Sending Blessing**

“May the God of glory” VT #1053

### **Song**

“Praise God (Doxology)” VT #71

*Worshippers can be encouraged to sing the option of their choice: A, B, or C. The contemporary refrain, “Alleluia” #72 with ASL #73 may be incorporated.*