

# EXPANSIVE LANGUAGE IN VOICES TOGETHER

## Gendered Images of God

### 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. This document explains how the Mennonite Worship and Song Committee approached expansive language, and specifically gendered images of God, in *Voices Together*.

The committee recognizes that 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.

For more on the overall approach to language in *Voices Together* and a resource to guide reflection in your communities, see appendix A, “Expansive and Inclusive Language in Worship.”

### Why use expansive language for God?

#### REFLECTIONS ON LANGUAGE

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 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.



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.

## 1 WHO GOD IS

God is beyond human categories and language. God transcends time and space, matter and thought, male and female. The Bible offers caution when naming God, since any one name could make God into an idol. From the burning bush, God speaks a mysterious name: “I AM WHO I AM” (Exodus 3:1-14). We can never grasp the fullness of God. By expanding the images of God we experience in worship, we can explore this mystery.

At the same time, God is revealed to humans in ways we can understand through images that connect with our lives and our world. God is revealed to us in Scripture through story, poetry, prophecy, law, and many different images (see appendix B, “Scriptural Ways to Address God in Worship”). In Jesus Christ, we know God in human flesh, and are invited into relationship with God (John 1:1-18). Despite the limits of language, we meet God in prayer and worship through the power of the Spirit.

To encounter God, we need language that makes sense in our lives. Gender is part of human life and personal relationships. Removing gendered language entirely can limit our ability to relate personally to God. Using a variety of gendered images can deepen our relationship with God. Instead of eliminating gendered language, *Voices Together* expands the language that is used for God, known within and beyond human categories.

## 2 WHO WE ARE

As human beings, in our common humanity and our vast diversity, we are made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27). When we come together for worship, we bring different life experiences that shape how we experience language for God. We aim to worship in solidarity with a wide variety of people, including people who have faced discrimination because of their gender. We long to be hospitable to one another in worship through the words we use. We strive to be attentive to pastoral needs, and to the ways different images of God have sustained, wounded, and liberated those in our communities.

As worshiping communities that compose Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Church USA, we are also diverse. Local congregations take different approaches to language for God. *Voices Together* aims to resource a breadth of current practices. Not every song and resource will serve every community, but each is an opportunity to encounter an aspect of how we worship God today.

## 3 WHO GOD CALLS US TO BECOME

God calls us to do justice (Micah 6:6-8). We follow Jesus on the path of liberation (Luke 4:16-20). The Spirit inspires us to imagine and join in creating a world free from oppression where each person is valued—to live into a new creation (Acts 2). The images and language we use for God shape how we see the world. They form our worldviews in ways that may be beyond our conscious awareness, affecting how we relate to other people by defining what we see as normal, acceptable, or good in ourselves, others, and our communities. For example, using a limited number of images for God can limit whom we see as suitable for leadership, as a Stanford University [research study](#) demonstrates. In contrast, using expansive imagery for God can help us see and live out the conviction that each person is created in God’s image. The images for God we use in worship shape our actions. The language we use in worship casts a vision of who God calls us to become and can help us live into God’s just and peaceful new creation.



## How were decisions made for *Voices Together*?

Decisions about expansive language in *Voices Together* were not driven by the personal preferences of committee members, a desire to be politically correct, or the loudest or majority voices in the denominations. Instead, the committee aspired to 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.

### BACKGROUND: LANGUAGE IN HYMNALS CHANGES OVER TIME

Denominational hymnals are compilations of many images and metaphors for God—a place from which communities explore, discern, repeat, and internalize these images.

Mennonites have compiled dozens of hymnals over the centuries, each with new songs speaking to new contexts. The first Anabaptist hymnal, the *Ausbund* (1583), focused on God as comforter and victor in the midst of martyrdom. In more recent Mennonite hymnals (*Mennonite Hymnal*, 1969, and *Hymnal: A Worship Book*, 1992), images of God have continued to expand and resonate with modern spiritual life.

*Hymnal: A Worship Book* and the supplements *Sing the Journey* (2005) and *Sing the Story* (2007) include many traditionally masculine images of God, such as Father, King, and Lord. They also include traditionally feminine imagery in songs like “O God, Great Womb of Wondrous Love” (HWB 155) and “Mothering God, You Gave Us Birth” (HWB 482). Songs such as “Long Before My Journey’s Start” (STJ 36) explore *sophia*, the feminine Greek word for divine wisdom. “Loving Spirit” (STJ 34) explores *ruach*, the feminine Hebrew word for spirit or breath.

*Voices Together* (2020) also includes both masculine and feminine imagery of God, as well as many more metaphors that are not tied to gender. In both adding and revising texts, the committee incorporated vibrant images of God drawn from Scripture and tradition.

### COMMITTEE PROCESS: CASE BY CASE

1. For every song considered for *Voices Together*, the full hymnal committee discussed desired and possible changes. The committee developed a list of questions to guide these discussions, not a one-size-fits-all set of rules (see an adaptation in appendix A, “Expansive and Inclusive Language”).
2. The *Voices Together* text committee then compared historical and contemporary sources to determine what, if any, changes would fit well within the scope of the collection, as well as with the poetic and musical style of the song. Every word in every text of *Voices Together* was carefully considered to determine its final form. We took each decision on a case-by-case basis. Sometimes well-known and well-loved texts are already quite different from their first published versions. Sometimes images and phrases are so integral to the poetry of a text that changing them would provide more frustration than benefit. Sometimes copyright restrictions require exact duplication of previously published versions. When possible, living authors were consulted about proposed changes, or invited to offer revisions.
3. The text committee brought proposed drafts back to the full committee for consideration, at times presenting multiple options. Major changes were sung and affirmed by vote. In some cases, upon testing a possible revision, the committee returned to the version of the text originally considered rather than implementing changes. Several revised texts were tested publicly in material published by the committee, and feedback was used to refine revisions.



## APPROACHES AND EXAMPLES

Because we sought to provide a breadth of masculine, feminine, and other metaphorical images for God, we looked carefully at the function of each image in its sung context.

- The metaphorical language and approach of a text guided our decisions. For example, in the hymn “Children of the Heavenly Father” (VT 517), the metaphor of God as Father is integral to the text and is developed throughout. In that case, the gendered title was retained without change. In contrast, “This Is My Father’s World” uses the same gendered title, but without any further metaphorical development. Following the example of recent hymnals from other denominations that engage the text’s central image of God as creator, *Voices Together* uses the phrase and title “This Is God’s Wondrous World” (VT 180).
- In several instances, alternative phrases or full texts are provided that expand the available gendered language. See, for example, “Praise God (Doxology)” (VT 71), which includes three possible texts: one that uses fully gender-neutral images; one that uses *him* for God; and one that uses *her* for God. Another example of this approach is “The Lord Bless You and Keep You” (VT 846). Communities may discern together which set of words to use in worship; it may also be fruitful to invite individuals to choose for themselves, allowing both versions to be sung simultaneously.
- Many contemporary texts include expansive biblical language for God. “God Lights a Lamp” (VT 299) is based on the parable of God as a woman who searches for a lost coin (Luke 15:8-10), and “Ngayong nagdadapit hapon (When Twilight Comes)” (VT 501) portrays Jesus gathering his disciples like a mother hen (Luke 13:34). “How Great Is Our God (Cuán grande es Dios)” (VT 116) names God as King, Lion and Lamb, Beginning and End, and Father, Spirit, Son. “We Long to Know Her” (VT 44) presents a wide variety of roles for God—maker of heaven, knitter of sinews, shepherd, sculptor, potter—and simply applies she/her pronouns to them. There is nothing inherently gendered in any of those roles, but they have been historically presented as masculine.
- In some cases, juxtaposing images suggests that varied approaches can coexist and complement one another. “O Worship Our God, All Glorious Above” (VT 74), where she/her pronouns have replaced he/him pronouns, reframes the image of God as a warrior. On the facing page is “Praise, My Soul, the King of Heaven!” (VT 75), which uses traditionally masculine titles and pronouns throughout.
- In many other cases, gender-neutral language is applied. See, for example, “You Are Exalted” (VT 86), “My Shepherd Will Supply My Need” (VT 640), “Morning Has Broken” (VT 495), and “Holy God, We Praise Thy Name” (VT 126).



## Questions for reflection and discussion

The approach to expansive language in *Voices Together* is one part of a larger and ongoing conversation. The following questions are an invitation to reflect on your experience and the experience of your community. As you reflect on these questions, consider how you can learn from those in your community who may be marginalized because of their gender. 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.

1. What is an image of God that has sustained you, especially in difficult times? For whom might this image be challenging? What is an image of God that is challenging for you personally, and why? For whom might this image be life-giving?
2. What new image of God has delighted you? What is an image of God that has surprised you and opened new possibilities?
3. Are there images of God that you struggle with in songs that you love? How do your memories of singing a song in particular settings affect your feelings about it? In what other ways have you experienced tension between a song's music and its imagery for God?
4. What images of God (names, titles, pronouns, roles, descriptions) are most prominent in worship in your community? What do the images that you use say about who God is, who is part of your community, and who you are called to become?
5. What images of God could it be helpful for you or your community to explore in greater depth in worship? What familiar or new images from Scripture and tradition could speak into this moment in the life of your community and the world? How would you engage a variety of images of God in ways that help individuals and the community receive them?

## Additional resources

[\*Voices Together: Worship Leader Edition\*](#)

[\*Voices Together\* website](#)

[Menno Snapshots blog: \*Voices Together\* series](#)

[\*Leader\* magazine Fall 2020 special issue on \*Voices Together\*](#)

[Anabaptist Worship Network blog](#)



## Appendix A *Voices Together: Worship Leader Edition*

### 355 Expansive and Inclusive Language in Worship

The words we use in worship shape how we understand God, one another, and the world around us. The metaphors we use affect how we encounter God in worship. They also form our worldviews in ways that may be beyond our conscious awareness, affecting how we relate to other people by defining what we see as normal, acceptable, or good in ourselves, others, and the world. Therefore, the words we use in worship also shape our actions and how we live into God's just and peaceful new creation.

In Scripture, tradition, and experience we encounter God in many ways (*356 Scriptural Ways to Address God in Worship*). In choosing words for worship, whether spoken, sung, or seen, we aspire to explore the breadth and depth of our faith. The language we use can clarify and expand our faith, or it can limit our vision.

Our world contains an amazing array of human diversity. We gather for worship as diverse communities and aim to worship in solidarity with a wide variety of people around the world and across time. The words we sing and pray can welcome or marginalize, divide or unify. Complicating this reality, different people often experience the same words in different ways.

The following is a list of themes to consider as you choose words for worship. These questions are intended to invite reflection rather than offer a full analysis. These themes were used to select and revise words for worship and songs for *Voices Together*.

- Who is God?
  - Do we use a wide range of biblical images and names for God?
  - Do we explore images and names for God that are new to our community?
  - How do the categories outlined below shape our vision of who God is?
- Theological diversity
  - Do our words reflect a diversity of theological perspectives present in our community?
  - Do our words honor traditional and familiar language?
  - Do our words explore new theological directions and possibilities?
  - Do we use words that bridge difference and encourage dialogue?
- Age
  - How are different stages of life recognized and described in the words we use?
  - Do we honor children by using words they can understand?
  - Do we honor elders by respecting the memory of beloved words?
- Race and ethnicity
  - Do the assumptions of one race, ethnicity, or culture within the community dominate decisions about language?
  - Are additional languages approached with respect (*29 Worship in Multiple Languages*)?
  - Is darkness or "black" identified with sin? Are positive images of darkness also present?
  - Is race reduced to discrete categories, such as Black and white?
- Class and economic status
  - Can people with varying levels of economic privilege share in the words that are chosen?
  - Is material wealth equated with blessing?
- Ability
  - Are people of all abilities honored in the language chosen in worship?
  - Is disability equated with punishment, sin, or lack of faith?
  - Does worship incorporate diverse ways of communicating—speech, written words, gestures, sign language, and more—to engage all worshipers present in the community (*27 Accessible Worship*)?
- Gender and sexuality
  - Is the human body respected as good and holy?
  - Are a wide variety of relationships honored, including singleness and a range of family structures?
  - Do words privilege one gender—for example, is male language used to refer to all human beings?
  - Are oppressive gender roles reinforced by our choice of words?





- Are traditional male terms such as Lord and kingdom balanced with other expressions?
- Will survivors of gender-based violence experience the words chosen as liberating and healing?
- Other Christians, and people of other religious traditions
  - Would people of other faiths and no faith feel respected in our worship?
  - Do we avoid needless offense against people of other Christian traditions, other religious traditions, and no religion, even as we honor distinctives of our faith?
  - Have we avoided violating prohibitions of other religions (such as using the Hebrew name of God)?
- Colonialism and nationalism
  - Do we choose words that respect people of all nations and cultures?
  - Do our words invite an identification with the worldwide church?
  - Do our words assume or perpetuate imperialist worldviews?
- Relationship of humanity to the earth and nonhuman creatures
  - Is the earth celebrated as a good gift?
  - Do our words honor nonhuman creatures?
  - How do we depict the role of humanity as part of creation?

See also *Voices Together: Worship Leader Edition* 2 Balancing Trusted Structures and Creative Change, 28 Worship and Culture, and 354 Choosing Words for Worship.

## Appendix B *Voices Together: Worship Leader Edition*

### 356 Scriptural Ways to Address God in Worship

The following scriptural names for God may help leaders prepare to 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.

#### NAMES AND IMAGES OF THE SPIRIT

Advocate (John 14:16, 26)	Intercessor (Romans 8:26)
Breath of God; breath of the risen Jesus (Genesis 1:1-2; Job 32:8; 33:4; John 20:22)	Spirit of adoption (Romans 8:15; Galatians 4:4-7)
Bringer of freedom (2 Corinthians 3:17)	Spirit of Christ (Romans 8:9; 1 Peter 1:11)
Comforter (Acts 9:31)	Spirit of God (Matthew 3:16; Romans 8:9; Philippians 3:3)
Counselor (John 14:16, 26)	Spirit of holiness (Romans 1:4)
Creator Spirit (Genesis 1:2)	Spirit of truth (John 15:26; 16:13)
Dove (Matthew 3:16)	Spirit of wisdom (Isaiah 11:2)
Eternal Spirit (Hebrews 9:14)	Wind (Genesis 1:1-2; Acts 2:2)
Fire, flame (Acts 2:3)	
Holy Spirit (Isaiah 63:10-11; Luke 3:16; 1 Thessalonians 4:8)	

#### NAMES AND IMAGES OF JESUS

Anointed one, Christ, Messiah (Psalm 2:2; Matthew 1:16; 2:4; John 1:41)	Emmanuel (Matthew 1:23)
Bread of life (John 6:35)	Friend (John 15:12-15)
Bright morning star (Revelation 22:16)	Friend of sinners (Matthew 11:19)
Bringer of good news, freedom, release (Luke 4:18; John 8:36; Galatians 5:1)	Good shepherd (John 10:11, 14)
Cornerstone (Ephesians 2:20; 1 Peter 2:6-7)	Head of the church (Colossians 1:18)
Desire of nations (Haggai 2:7)	Healer (Matthew 14:36; Luke 6:19; Acts 4:10)
Deliverer (Romans 11:26)	High priest (Hebrews 3:1; 4:14)
	Jesus (Matthew 1:21)
	King of kings (1 Timothy 6:15; Revelation 19:16)



Lamb of God (John 1:29; Revelation 5:6)  
 Light of the world (John 9:5)  
 Living stone (1 Peter 2:4)  
 Lord of lords (1 Timothy 6:15; Revelation 19:16)  
 Master (Luke 5:5)  
 Mediator (1 Timothy 2:5; Hebrews 12:24)  
 Mother hen (Matthew 23:37; Luke 13:34)  
 Only Son (John 1:18; 3:16)  
 Physician (Matthew 9:12)  
 Reconciler (Romans 5:11; 2 Corinthians 5:19)  
 Redeemer (Galatians 3:13; Titus 2:14)

Savior (Luke 2:11; Titus 3:6)  
 Servant of God (Isaiah 42:1; 49:5-7)  
 Son of David (Matthew 9:27; 15:22)  
 Son of God (Matthew 26:63; Luke 1:35)  
 Son of Man (Mark 2:10; John 1:51)  
 Sun of righteousness (Malachi 4:2)  
 Teacher (Mark 10:35; John 20:16)  
 Wonderful Counselor (Isaiah 9:6)  
 The way, the truth, the life (John 14:6)  
 The Word (John 1:1; Revelation 19:13)

### NAMES AND IMAGES OF GOD

Almighty God (Genesis 35:11; Revelation 1:8)  
 Alpha and Omega (Revelation 1:8)  
 Birthing mother (Deuteronomy 32:18; Isaiah 42:14)  
 Comforting mother (Isaiah 66:13)  
 Creator (Genesis 1; Romans 1:25; 1 Peter 4:19)  
 Everlasting God (Genesis 21:33; Isaiah 40:28)  
 Faithful God (Deuteronomy 7:9; 32:4; Psalm 31:5)  
 Father of mercies and God of all consolation  
 (2 Corinthians 1:3)  
 Father of orphans, protector of widows (Psalm  
 68:5)  
 Fire (Hebrews 12:29)  
 God of peace (Hebrews 13:20)  
 God, our righteousness (Jeremiah 23:6)  
 Gracious God (Jonah 4:2)  
 Healer (Exodus 15:26)  
 Holy God (Leviticus 19:2; Joshua 24:19; Isaiah 5:16)  
 Liberating God (Exodus 6:3-8; Luke 1:68-79)  
 Living God (Jeremiah 10:10; 2 Corinthians 3:3;  
 6:16)

Lord (Genesis 15:2; Acts 3:22)  
 Loving God (1 John 4:7-12)  
 Midwife (Psalm 22:9-10)  
 Most High God (Genesis 14:18; Psalm 9:2)  
 Mother bear (Hosea 13:8)  
 Mother bird (Psalm 17:8; 57:1; 91:4; Deuteronomy  
 32:10-11)  
 Our Father (Isaiah 64:8; Matthew 6:9; Ephesians  
 1:2)  
 Peace (Judges 6:24)  
 Protector (Joshua 24:17; Psalm 41:2; John 17:11-15)  
 Provider (Genesis 22:14)  
 Sanctifier (Exodus 31:13; Leviticus 20:8)  
 Redeemer (Job 19:25; Psalm 78:35; Isaiah 44:24)  
 Refuge and strength (Psalm 28:8; 46:1; 91:2)  
 Rock (2 Samuel 23:3; Habakkuk 1:12)  
 Shelter (Psalm 91:1; Isaiah 25:4; Revelation 7:15)  
 Shepherd (Genesis 49:24; Psalm 23:1; 80:1)

*The Worship Sourcebook* (Grand Rapids, MI: Faith Alive Resources, 2013), 178–79, adapt. Barbara Nelson  
 Gingerich and Mary Schertz.

