Breaking the Binary: Language for a Wider Welcome
A resource for churches by Colleen Toole (they/them/theirs)

In the past few years, we have found ourselves in the middle of what can seem like a cultural revolution concerning gender identity. With transgender people like Janet Mock and Laverne Cox coming into the public eye, movies like The Danish Girl and TV shows like Transparent receiving both attention and scrutiny, we are in a time of increased trans visibility. Unfortunately, with trans visibility comes trans vulnerability. Violence against trans people (particularly trans women of color) continues to rise, with 2015 breaking the record for number of trans people murdered in the United States with 21 known homicides. Laws such as North Carolina’s House Bill 2 target trans and gender non-conforming people. In the midst of these shifts in language, legislation and understanding, how does the church respond? What does it mean to fully support the trans and gender non-conforming communities, and how can churches who wish to be truly welcoming live that out through the language that we use in worship? As a non-binary person, I have been both frustrated in worship that has shut me out and filled with a sense of belonging as I’ve heard language that has welcomed me in. In this resource, we will go through areas of worship that can exclude based on gender, talk through some easy solutions, and give food for thought on how to rethink some of our defaults about gender in worship.

A Note on Language

We are in a remarkable time for language surrounding gender. Many people who have not found the language of “man” and “woman” to fit them have started coming up with new terms to describe their lived realities, terms which are often shared and brought to popularity over the internet. In February 2014, Facebook added over fifty new gender identifiers to its profile settings in an attempt to keep up with the burgeoning language for gender. Language is always contextual, imprecise, and personal. While there is general agreement over the meanings of these new words, each individual will have different nuances in their interpretation of any given gender identifier. Just as every woman has a different idea of what it means to be a woman, and every man has a different idea of what it means to be a man, every trans/non-binary/genderqueer/gender non-conforming person has a different idea of what that means. That’s okay!

Here are a few notes on some of the language important to this resource, and how I am using it in this particular context:

2 For a broader overview of gender theory and other ways the church can become more hospitable to people of all gender identities, please see the “How to Gender” resource that can be found in the Gender Resource Dropbox.
3 For a complete list: http://slate.me/2aVCO05
Transgender/trans: Used as an umbrella term to indicate anyone who does not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth. This includes binary-identified trans individuals who identify within the gender binary (such as people assigned male at birth but identify as female, and vice-versa), those whose gender identities fall outside the gender binary, and those whose gender identities shift at various points of their lives.

Cisgender/cis: Used as an umbrella term to indicate anyone who does identify with the gender they were assigned at birth. (For example: a person assigned male at birth who identifies as a man would be cis.) While “trans” means “across from”, “cis” means “in the same way as”.

Non-binary/Genderqueer: Used in this resource to mean people who do not identify as men or as women.

Intersex: A term to describe a person born with ambiguous genitalia.

Gender non-conforming: Used in this resource to mean anyone whose gender identity and/or gender expression/presentation does not fall within gender roles. This includes transgender individuals as well as cisgender individuals who dress or act in ways that do not align with society’s expectations of their gender. Some critique this term feeling it reinforces traditional gender roles. Some embrace it feeling it turns the tables on traditional gender roles. It is often used in statistics and legal reports.

Queer: A slur used against the LGBTQ+ community that has since been reclaimed by some within the community and used as an umbrella term to indicate anyone who falls outside straight and/or cisgender norms. Queer tends to be used by younger generations, and sometimes older generations are made uncomfortable by its use. Queer has also become an important academic term (queer theory, queer theology, etc.).

Where We’ve Been, and Where We Are Going

In his essay, “The Ontology of Violence” (1996), James Farris highlights two relational issues imbedded in our religious language. The first is the tendency towards dualism, or binary thinking. This means speaking in either/or terms, with very little attention paid towards the middle (light/dark, male/female, rich/poor, good/evil). The second is the hierarchy placed on these binaries—one part of the pair is better than the other. Light is better than dark. Male is better than female (Sanders and Yarber 2015). This kind of thinking serves both to marginalize the “lesser” half of the pair, and to push people toward categories that can be easily defined and put into a system of control.

The late 20th century saw great shifts in worship language, commonly referred to as the move toward inclusive language. The primary focus of this movement was challenging

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4 Acronym to indicate: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and all others who fall within the spectrum of sexualities and gender identities.
patriarchal language in relationship to God and humanity. God could no longer be assumed to be (only) masculine or male; many pastors began to forgo the use of pronouns altogether in reference to God, as well as expand language to include feminine aspects of God. In regards to humanity, words like “mankind” or “brothers” were no longer considered to be “gender neutral”. Work to bring forth the accomplishments and positive qualities of women took off in liturgy and hymnody.

This movement did a lot of important work toward abolishing the hierarchy within the gender binary. It challenged the idea that men were “better” than women, a challenge that was and still is absolutely vital in the life of the church. The next step, particularly within the shifting climate of gender today, is to challenge the dualistic, binary thinking that so often lives in our culture and our churches. To do so, there’s some letting go we need to do.

**Three Assumptions That Do Not Serve Us**

1. *Everyone identifies as a “man” or as a “woman”.*

   Many people, both trans and cis, identify as men or as women. But that is not the whole story. There are intersex people whose bodies fall outside those binaries, and all kinds of variance within gender identities beyond the binary.

2. *A “man” looks/dresses/sounds/acts a certain way and a “woman” looks/dresses/sounds/acts a certain way.*

   This is a thought that has been challenged for some time now as “gender roles” have come under scrutiny. However, we all still carry assumptions about people based on how they look, sound, dress, or act. We will refer to complete strangers by gendered pronouns based on how they look, sound, dress, or act, and often find ourselves confused only when someone does not align with our assumptions of gender.

3. *Something that addresses the LGB community will also address the TQ+ community.*

   Often as churches seek to become welcoming of the LGBTQ+ community, they will focus on issues of sexuality. These issues have been prominent for longer, there are more resources available, the narratives are more common, more work has been done. In the broader history of the LGBTQ+ rights movement, however, there has been a lot of tension between LGB community and the TQ+ community. Major organizations such as the Human Rights Campaign have a history of pushing trans issues aside in order to focus on “more attainable” goals such as marriage equality. Therefore, for a church to show that it includes trans and gender non-conforming people in its definition of welcome, language specific to those communities must be used.

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5 For the history of tension between HRC and the trans community: http://bit.ly/2b87i0G
Gender Trouble in Worship

As we look to make our worship inclusive of all people, we must look at place where people can feel excluded. Gender issues arise in how we participate in worship, both by what we say and sing, and how we say and sing it. Here’s a rundown of many of the places gender shows up in worship services:

Singing/Speaking

Sometimes we split our liturgy or congregational singing between “men” and “women”, either simply to vary the voices or because there is some gendered quality we assign to whatever is being said or sung. There are two issues that arise with these kinds of divisions—first, the exclusion of anyone who does not identify within the binary, and second, assumptions regarding what “men’s” and “women’s” voices “should” sound like.

When singing or speaking in unison, divided by gender, the overwhelming sound is of higher women’s voices and lower men’s voices, which communicates to people throughout their lives what men and women should sound like. This is particularly evident in singing. While men singing alto or women singing tenor are not unheard of even in some church choirs, think about, perhaps, a trans man who does not take the hormones which would lower his voice, and sings soprano. Without further language surrounding the instructions for singing, this man would likely feel uncomfortable and out of place singing with the men, but also hesitant to sing with the women (which might bring up feelings of “not being a REAL man”). Those who identify outside the gender binary itself might sing in the octave they feel most appropriate, or fail to sing or speak at all—which is certainly not the intention of the worship leaders!

It is worth noting that this division can also leave out children and adolescents. This can be particularly sensitive during puberty for boys whose voices are changing (and might be switching between different voice parts depending on the day)!

There are a couple of solutions to this dilemma. One is simply to vary the ways of dividing the congregation: by age, by location in the sanctuary, by function (choir, elders, deacons, trustees, etc.). The second, particularly useful for singing, is to divide by voice part rather than by gender—however, this presents its own challenges! Using voice parts like soprano, alto, tenor, and bass, can alienate untrained singers who might then feel that the congregational singing is “only for the trained singers” who are the “real musicians”. But using divisions like “high voices” and “low voices” can cause a ruckus with the trained singers, like tenors who think of themselves as having high voices and altos who would consider themselves lower voices. Thus, my proposed solution is, in a way, a double solution: dividing between “High Voices (SA)” and “Low Voices (TB)”. Some musicians prefer to use the word

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6 Things that fall beyond the scope of this resource but also affect gender expectations in worship include scripture and traditions surrounding worship (such as name tags, gendered expectations about who leads worship, etc.).
“trebles” instead of “women”, particularly in referring to a Treble Choir/Ensemble, though whether the word “trebles” is well known enough to be used in a broader congregational setting is up for debate. Particularly once the high/low language is established in your congregation, a songleader can easily verbally divide the congregation between “high” and “low” voices.

Liturgy/Hymnody

Many of the gender issues that come up in our liturgy and hymnody center on language relating to humanity. While there are certainly churches that still hold to exclusively masculine language concerning God, both feminine and gender-neutral images of God can be found in scripture and hymns. (God as the “rock of ages”, for example, is a gender-neutral image of God.)

It is in language used for humanity that the trouble usually arises. The inclusive language movements of the late 20th century (that still continue into today) worked hard to move our language away from the masculine neutral—the belief that masculine language and imagery encompassed all genders. The result is that we’ve moved from masculine language (“brothers in Christ”) to binary language (“brothers and sisters in Christ” ... or “sisters and brothers in Christ” for the particularly progressive). This has been a very important movement, and particularly given the fact that women are still not treated equally in church or in society, it is vital to continue to lift up gender. Binary language isn’t bad; it is simply incomplete. Those who are not sisters or brothers but are constantly hearing exclusively binary language can easily feel invisible or invalidated in worship.

The other danger in our worship language is continuing to reinforce gender assumptions. For example: women are always nurturing and men are always strong. There is more language challenging this in our hymnody of late, as the assumed gender roles of women and men has also been challenged by textwriters focusing on a broader scope of humanity. Particularly useful as far as challenging gender roles are the hymn texts of Brian Wren, whose book What Language Can I Borrow? (1989) has been vital in the movement beyond patriarchal language in worship. His hymn text “Bring Many Names” uses gendered language but subverts expectations. It is the Mother God who is strong and the Father God who is warm and nurturing. Jean Janzen’s hymn text “Mothering God, You Gave Me Birth” borrows Mother Christ imagery from Julian of Norwich, creating a juxtaposition of masculine and feminine that speaks powerfully beyond the binary.21
Recently, there have been movements to address issues of sexuality specifically in liturgy and hymnody. This is wonderful, but does not mean that people of all gender identities will necessarily feel connected to those words, particularly with the divisions that have marked the broader LGBTQ+ movement. Specific work must be done.

**Working with Existing Texts**

Sometimes, these issues come up in resources often used by churches and denominations, including prayer books, creeds/confessions/affirmations of faith, and hymns. There are beautiful texts that use binary language (just like there are beautiful texts that use patriarchal language) and we don’t want to lose them all. At the same time, we want to be sure that all feel seen and loved in our worship. So what steps can we take?

**Editing**

In some cases, it can be easy to edit or adapt the language to be more friendly to those who exist outside the binary (replacing “both genders” with “all genders”, or “made male and female” to “made in the image of God”, for example). This is especially useful for liturgical resources that encourage adaptation for use in worship. Different traditions will have different expectations as far as adapting creeds or affirmations of faith from their original language, so that may or may not be possible. Other sources are difficult to edit, either due to copyright or because they have poetic language that can be tricky to adapt. (Hymns tend to fall into both of these categories.) In that case, check for...

**Alternate versions**

Some searching online may bring up other versions of the text that have been edited and published in different resources. This is particularly helpful for hymns. Hymnary.org is a great resource for looking at various versions of a hymn text with the “Compare Texts” function. The New Century Hymnal (United Church of Christ 1995) did a lot of work in editing language of existing hymn texts to be more inclusive. While that committee did not look specifically at binary language, it is a useful resource and worth a look. When you have exhausted resources and still are left with binary language, look at...

**Context**

What else is going on in your worship service? Can you bring gender-expansive language to the forefront before or after the binary language? How are you framing this language with the congregation? When exclusively binary language is unavoidable, making sure there is language that stretches beyond the gender binary (preferably just before and/or just after) is vital. Further conversation with the congregation to put the historical binary...
language in context can be very helpful, as well, establishing that when we say or sing the binary, we know gender stretches beyond that simplistic view.  

**Creating New Texts**

As we find ourselves creating texts for worship, thinking of gender beyond the binary affords us many opportunities for expansion and growth in how we experience God and each other through our language. Too often we “default” to gendered language and relationships. By thinking through how we use gender we can come to a deeper and more purposeful use of language.

**Easy Solutions**

It’s easy to expand our language beyond the binary in address to the congregation, by simply adding a gender-neutral group to address:

- Sisters, brothers, and...
  - ...siblings.
  - ...all family in Christ.
  - ...all children of God.

Syntax does become important here; make sure that the gender neutral group is listed alongside the gendered groups. Sentence structures like “Sisters and brothers, children of God,” can make it sound like “children of God” is simply describing “sisters and brothers”. It is also important to keep the integrity of the familial relationship in this particular address—a phrase such as “sisters, brothers, and friends” can imply that all those who are not sisters or brothers are somehow outside of/lesser than the family relationship.

Using gender-neutral forms of address is also a good option. Here are some ideas:

- People of God
- Children of God
- Siblings
- Body of Christ
- Friends
- Family in Christ
- Church
- Beloved
- Seekers

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12 Simply saying “we understand gender to be more than a binary” is not enough, however. It must be supplemented with gender expansive language, due to the deep ways that language works on people.
13 I still would argue it is important to have some gendered language in worship, in order to lift up those genders that have not always been embraced in Christian life and worship.
14 Siblings becomes a far less awkward word with use. I myself was not convinced by “siblings”, finding it to be a somewhat clinical word, until I encountered someone who used it all the time. After hearing it again and again, I began to embrace siblings!
**Actions/Attributes/Relationship**

It is not uncommon for people to use gendered language as the final descriptor in language outside of worship. ("She’s a fine young woman," or "He’s a polite man," for example.) One way to avoid gendered language when talking about people is to focus on what qualities you are addressing. ("They’re a great student," or "They’re a tremendous writer," for example.) In years of working in the southern part of the United States, I have often come across people who automatically want to "ma’am" me as a sign of respect, but realize that would not be appropriate or respectful of my gender identity. I often give them alternatives based on our relationship: "friend" or "boss", for example, depending on the moment and relationship. This requires more specificity of language instead of defaulting to gender. This is also how many hymns have shifted language away from pronouns: they will put the emphasis on adjectives or nouns instead of pronouns.

In Calvin Institute of Worship/Faith Alive Christian Resources’ *Worship Sourcebook* (2013), there is a section on preparing extemporaneous prayers that is particularly useful in this work.\(^\text{15}\) It has resources pointing toward expanding our linguistic expression of God by thinking of attributes of God (what God is like), and actions of God (what God has done). Particularly as we focus not only on language about God, but also language about humanity, I propose adding one more category into the mix: "relationship". Here we find a useful framework for thinking particularly about forms of address within worship language.

- **Action**: What is God doing? What are we doing?
- **Attributes**: What is God like? What are we like?
- **Relationship**: Who is God to us? Who are we to God? Who are we to each other?

This, of course, will be different in different parts of the worship service, in different liturgical seasons, in different worshipping contexts. As we come for confession we might be sinners who have fallen short of God’s call for our lives, crying out to a comforting God who reaches out to us with grace. As we prepare to hear the word read and proclaimed we might be seekers looking for the continued signs from the God who has guided us this far. When we come to feast at the table we might be joined together as sisters, brothers, and siblings in the family of God.

*The Trinity*

Part of what makes binary language so appealing is its balance. Binaries have a natural poetry to them, a structural integrity that allows for creativity. However, within much of Christian theology is an alternative poetic structure: the structure of the Trinity. The Trinity has balance that is not dualistic, but based in structures of threes. The Trinity also is based in relationship rather than in hierarchy. While the church has not always done a great job at

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\(^{15}\) Section 4.3 in The Worship Sourcebook.
honoring all members of the Trinity (with some traditions sidelining the Holy Spirit), the root of Trinitarian theology holds the equality of all persons of the Trinity together.

The Trinity can also be connected with gender: God, the Creator, as genders beyond the binary, Christ as male, and the Holy Spirit as female. While moving beyond these strict gender assignments can be moving (see again the example of powerful mother Christ imagery), the reclaiming of the femininity of the Holy Spirit and the expansiveness (including in gender) of the Creator can be enormously powerful as a way to lift up those often cast aside in a religion with a male Savior. The focus of God the Creator as gender expansive can be a relief to those who find themselves outside the binary when confronted with Genesis’ binary imagery of creation. While Genesis says “created male and female”, it also says “created in the image of God”. If we expand our image of God, we can expand our ideas of what it means to be created in that image.

The Goal: Moving from Binary to Spectrum

When Peter quotes Joel in the story of Pentecost (Acts 2:17-21), the passage he quotes makes use of several binaries: man/woman, young/old, slave/free. This passage begins with God declaring, “I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,” and then using binaries to explain what “all” means before ending with “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved”. These binaries are meant to indicate not either/or, but a spectrum. Some binaries in particular evoke a spectrum—for example, young/old. We know, of course, there are people who fall between the categories “young” and “old”, and generally when that binary is used it means “young, old, and all in between”. Similarly, day/night: we know there are times such as twilight and sunrise which are outside that strict binary. Yet, when we say “men” and “women”, we place them in two categories rather than on a spectrum.

We do have precedent for moving from a binary understanding to a spectrum understanding within the history of the United States: race. Much of the conversation surrounding race in the United States even though the 1960’s focused on a black/white binary, leaving little space for other races, let alone multiracial individuals. This binary was officially upheld in the “one drop rule”. Much of the conversation has shifted now, though, and our language in hymns and liturgy now reflects a spectrum-based understanding of race.

One day, I hope we will reach a place where the phrase “men and women” evokes a spectrum instead of a binary. The question now is: what do we need to do to bring forth that reality? What steps do we need to take to shift our understanding? These are questions we will need to continually ask ourselves as we move towards a broader understanding of what it means to be the church, together.

16 For more information, see “Who Is Black? One Nation’s Definition” by F. James Davis: http://to.pbs.org/2b8arNY
Resources

This is a conversation and a movement that will continue to develop, change, and shift throughout the next decades of worship life. Here are some resources that are useful as we continue this journey:

- **What Language Can I Borrow?** By Brian Wren: This is one of the key books in the movement towards inclusive language from the late 1980's. While it was understandably written with a binary understanding of gender, the principles outlined in the book still stand strong.

- **Microaggressions in Ministry** by Cody J. Sanders and Angela Yarber: A useful and practical book on the power of religious language in today’s context. Focuses specifically on issues of race, gender, sexual orientation, and gender identity, and how they show up in all aspects of ministry. Particularly strong on making the case for why change in language matters.

- **Inclusive Marriage Services: A Wedding Sourcebook** ed. Kimberly Bracken Long and David Maxwell: While some binary language shows up (“sisters and brothers”), this is a great resource for weddings that removes traditionally gendered language and gendered assumptions. It’s also useful to see how that is done, and any binary language can easily be adapted.

- **The Worship Sourcebook** from Calvin Institute of Christian Worship: Also has easily adaptable binary language, as well as language beyond binaries. The “Preparing Extemporaneous Prayers” section is particularly useful, as mentioned earlier.


**Bibliography**


About the author: Colleen Toole (they/them/theirs) is a genderqueer Presbyterian. They are a graduate of Princeton Theological Seminary (where they were co-moderator and worship coordinator for BGLASS, the seminary's LGBTQ+ group), a former Lovelace Scholar of the Hymn Society in the United States and Canada, and a long-time member of Montreat Conference Center's summer staff. They presented a workshop on this particular subject at the 2016 Hymn Society Annual Conference in Redlands, California. Their work has been published in Discipleship Ministries' History of Hymns column. They also work as a freelance director and sound designer for live theater.

Feel free to distribute this resource for non-commercial use. Further questions can be directed to colleen.toole@gmail.com. This version edited on August 8, 2016.