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Creating Genderless God-language Through Lutheran Liturgy

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on the work of feminist and queer theologies, this paper examines and challenges traditional God-language, proposing the implementation of genderless language in Christian worship liturgies. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) is used as a model for potential methods of shifting God-language. This work focuses on God-language in Lutheran liturgy, focusing on Scripture, hymns, doctrine, and prayer. This work seeks to prove that implementing genderless God-language throughout the liturgy will provide ELCA leaders the opportunity to be more inclusive, while representing God's transcendence beyond human conceptions such as gender.

I. Problematic God-language

How do Christians speak about God? Which words are chosen or intentionally avoided when trying to describe God? Traditional God-language is characterized by an overwhelming use of male pronouns, often positioning God in patriarchal roles of power, such as “King” or “Lord.” Christians, in an attempt to understand a God that in many ways is beyond human understanding, refer to God in terms that relate to their own existence but not necessarily in terms true of God. Patriarchal language has become so ingrained in Church tradition that it often goes unnoticed, a product of the societies in which early Christianity was spread. This has caused modern liturgies—including Scripture, hymns, doctrine, and prayer—to perpetuate problematic gendered God-language. Attempting to quantify God’s totality into human-made constructs of gender limits the magnificence of God, thus limiting the ways in which humans can connect with a truly transcendent God. What would happen if removing these human-made confines for God did not sever the connection to God, but instead acknowledged God’s totality in ways that are long overdue?

Humans do not fit into tidy categorical boxes, and likewise neither does God. Clinging to patriarchal language for the sake of tradition does not necessarily improve one’s faith, specifically when tradition ceases to serve the changing needs of Christians. By removing the element of gender, Christians may be able to understand God purely through their similarities to, and perhaps more importantly, their differences from God. Perhaps altering liturgies could radically change the way Christians relate to a God that is not quite like anything else. For the purposes of this research, the terms “liturgy” or “worship program” will be used to describe the myriad elements of a Christian worship program, including: Scripture, hymns, doctrine, and prayer. While each of these components of liturgy serves a

unique purpose in the worship program, the God-language of each must be reevaluated. Implementing genderless God-language throughout the liturgy will provide ELCA leaders the opportunity to be more inclusive, while representing God's transcendence beyond human conceptions such as gender.

II. The ELCA as a Model for Change

Churches of many denominations and backgrounds across the U.S. are facing empty pews and decreased membership, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) is no exception. In this modern religious climate, increasing numbers of Americans are identifying as "none," meaning they have no personal religious identification. As this decline of religious affiliation is often concluded to be a recent "generational change,"¹ it may be considered that a portion of these "nones," may carry religious beliefs but simultaneously feel unable to participate in organized worship. In the face of such decline, the path forward for the Church must involve finding ways to connect to the population that does not feel welcomed in religious settings. The Church has been exclusive and ignorant of many peoples, but one area in which it has specifically erred is in its approach to reaching those of various gender and sexual identities. The ELCA is often considered a very accepting and progressive denomination, primarily through their ordination of female and LGBTQ+ pastors. The ELCA has also made conscious efforts to create inclusive congregations through their partnership with the *Reconciling in Christ* organization, a movement that deems themselves "Lutherans for Full Participation," specifically advocating for outreach to the

¹ Gregory A. Smith and Alan Cooperman, "The Factors Driving the Growth of Religious 'Nones' in the U.S." *Pew Research Center*. September 14 2016, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/09/14/the-factors-driving-the-growth-of-religious-nones-in-the-u-s/>.

LGBTQ+ community². *Reconciling in Christ* also emphasizes the importance of small changes that can be implemented in the Church outside of worship, such as providing inclusive facilities, intentional observation of preferred pronouns, and improving general outreach in each congregation.³ Though the ELCA is fairly progressive in its inclusivity, it has in many ways clung to traditional God-language, perpetuating gendered models for God and binary ideals. For these reasons, the ELCA may be able to initiate a shift to genderless God-language and serve as a model for other denominations in the future.

Before attempting to change the ways in which gendered God-language is used in the Church overall, initiative is required on a smaller scale. Lutheran tradition in particular is called to continual improvement through the legacy of Martin Luther's Reformation. The demand for reform in our modern context turns to the intersection of gender and God-language. Certain denominations that have stricter adherence to traditional practices may face barriers to integrating new God-language into their worship programs. As such, it is reasonable to assume that denominations such as the ELCA will need to set an example for reforming God-language. As societies progress, so must the Church be able to continually adapt and relate to the situations of all Christians, including women, men, gender non-conforming peoples, the LGBTQ+ community, and so on. While the use of male pronouns and other gendered God-language may often be unintentional, the continual use of this language displays

² "Reconciling in Christ," *Reconciling Works*, <https://www.reconcilingworks.org/bic/>.

³ "Extending Hospitality to People of All Gender Identities and Gender Expressions," *Reconciling Works*, https://www.reconcilingworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/extending_hospit_gender.pdf

Christians' complicity in the exclusive, and perhaps inaccurate, pervading God-language. However, ignorance of the problem does not mean that the problem does not exist, or that there are not options in progressing beyond the problem. Changing gendered God-language may not be as simple as flipping pronouns in hymns; starting with the ELCA, shifting the mindset that has allowed gendered God-language to persist will call for careful attention to the entire liturgy.

III. Feminist Theology

To integrate genderless God-language into liturgy, ELCA leaders must first consider the current state of gendered God-language and past discussions of the topic. Feminist theology has long been focused on rectifying the injustices to women that the Church has perpetrated; while feminist theology seeks a much-needed justice for women, the methods of feminist theologians have largely overlooked the larger question of how Christians *should* speak and think of God. While the goal of female reconciliation with the Church is in itself a positive goal, perhaps long-term solutions could stem from shifting God-language to better include *all* peoples' relation to God.

The landmark works entitled *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* and *The Church and the Second Sex*, written by Mary Daly in the mid 1970s, delved into the problem of a male God and called for reexamination of this long-accepted trope. Daly writes that liberation for women will come from "castrating...language and images that reflect and perpetuate the structures of a sexist world."⁴ What Daly and other feminist theologians speak of often manifests itself in a mere change of pronouns for God, from "He" to "She," or an inclusion of both. This

⁴ Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), 9.

method that Daly proposes *does* aim to rid the Church of patriarchal language, but it also seems to overcorrect the problem by shifting all of the attention to feminine characteristics of God.

In *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, feminist theologian Elizabeth Johnson proposes that as cultures and societies evolve, just so should the ways that people discuss and analyze conceptions of God. She writes:

...There has been no timeless speech about God in the Jewish or Christian tradition. Rather, words about God are cultural creatures, entwined with the mores and adventures of the faith community that uses them. As cultures shift, so too does the specificity of God-talk.⁵

This evolving “God-talk” is present in many elements of liturgy, including interpretations of Scripture, hymns, doctrine, and prayer. The prevalence of God-language in such a range of contexts asserts the need for both accurate *and* inclusive God-language. Johnson contends that the identifications we associate with God are always idealized because of their association with God; this is evidenced in the relation of God to powerful and patriarchal positions, such as “King,” or God as a perpetual “He.”⁶ The frequent portrayal of God as male reinforces existing patriarchal ideals that prioritize males over females, however unintentional this may be. To remedy this, Johnson seeks to advocate for a shift of God-language to both male *and* female, promoting an equivalency between genders.⁷ This concept of God as simultaneously male and female has been evident in ELCA liturgy in the past. The hymn entitled “Loving Spirit” can be found in the *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*

⁵ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: The Crossroads Publishing Company, 1994) 6-7.

⁶ Johnson, *She Who Is*, 39.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 31.

hymnal (ELW); it uses no gendered pronouns but begins each verse by addressing God in one of several roles:

Loving Spirit, loving Spirit, you have chosen me to be...
 Like a mother you enfold me, hold my life within your own...
 Like a father you protect me, teach me the discerning eye...
 Friend and lover, in your closeness I am known and held and blessed...⁸

The roles portrayed through this God-language seem to emphasize God's relational nature, and not God's gender. Yet, the pictures of "mother" and "father" specifically denote gender(s) for God. Johnson goes on to argue that the totality of the "*imago Dei*"⁹ is the only way to truly represent God, specifically through the simultaneous image of both men and women together.¹⁰ This claim seems to represent both the significant contributions of feminist theology *and* its inherent flaws; to claim that representing God as female, or as male and female together, is a full representation of the "image of God," is complicit in a gender binary that is socially constructed by humans. While many of the initial feminist theologians wrote during an era when feminism itself was budding in the U.S., and a gender binary was much more socially accepted, the works of these feminist authors could not be the sole resource in moving forward toward a more inclusive God-language. If God's image is evidenced through humans who do not all fit within a gender binary, then God-language must be liberated from the confines of gender.

IV. Queer Theology

Feminist theologians have considered the roots of gendered God-language for decades; recently, queer theologians have contributed to finding solutions to the traditional

⁸ Shirley Erena Murray and W. Walker, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, number 397.

⁹Translation: "Image of God"

¹⁰Johnson, *She Who Is*, 31.

gendering of God. The critique of gender binaries and the transgression of boundaries that queer theology seeks is the component missing from the purely feminist discussion of God-language. According to Patrick Cheng's *Radical love: An Introduction to Queer Theology*, there are several meanings of the term "queer theology." Cheng expounds upon one definition as "'talk about God' that challenges and deconstructs the natural binary categories of sexual and gender identity."¹¹ Queer theology is based in a rejection of traditional tropes about gender and sexuality. In effect, "...to 'queer' something is to engage with a methodology that challenges and disrupts the status quo."¹² The use of queer theology then, in reassessing God-language, rejects the gender binary that would label God as male or female. The approach of queer theology acknowledges gender as a social construct, which negates it from applying to God. Queer theology places gender and sexuality along a spectrum, and seeks to dismantle patriarchal and binary ideas about God.

In an essay related to God and gender, queer theologian B.K. Hipsher argues that a complimentary view of both male *and* female images of God does not address the issues with perpetuating a gender binary; thus, a complimentary view of God as male *and* female does not satisfy the need for a true change in God-language.¹³ Inevitably, queer theologians often pair issues of gender and sex when discussing God-language. Hipsher radically proposes the notion of a "trans God," stating: "It is not enough to include homosexual identity and sexual expression in an expanded *imago Dei*. We must be critical enough to open up the possibilities for human expression to include the full range and fluidity of

¹¹ Patrick S. Cheng, *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology* (New York: Seabury Books, 2011), 9.

¹² *Ibid.*, 6.

¹³ B.K. Hipsher, "God is a Many Gendered Thing," in *Trans/formations*, Eds. Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood (London: SCM Press, 2009), 95.

human sexuality and sexual expression..."¹⁴ Hipsher's idea of a trans God differs from the genderless God proposed in *this* paper; yet, such arguments from queer theologians illustrate reasons why a genderless God could *also* be a faithful representation, as genderless language also seeks inclusivity. God-language such as Hipsher's expands on the foundations of feminist theology, further displaying the need for a complete reassessment of God-language. Hipsher illustrates Christian communities' failure to reach out to those of varying gender and sexual identities: "At this point most Christian denominations freeze...there is no community outreach, no sense of inclusion, no image of God in the context of the church community with which this particular Christic presence can identify."¹⁵ It is at the intersection of God-language and gender that churches are failing Christians, through the continued use of gendered, exclusive language. Because the spectrums of human gender and sexuality are fluid, God cannot be confined to "any single gender identity or sexual expression [without limiting] the possibilities of God's manifestations in humanity."¹⁶ The rejection of gender binaries and advocacy for expanded conceptions of God can be applied to a God that is beyond gender completely.

V. The Trinity

As humans occupy physical bodies, Christians often desire to relate to a transcendent God through physical characteristics such as gender. Hipsher contends that the incarnational person of Jesus forces us to examine the relation between theology and embodied gender.¹⁷ The question of God's gender is indeed complicated through the concept of the Holy Trinity, a doctrine describing God as "simultaneously one *and* three-

¹⁴ B.K. Hipsher, "God is a Many Gendered Thing," 97.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 99.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 99.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 98.

...both a mystery and an expression of the essential truth about God's relational nature."¹⁸

Because the entities of the Trinity are both individual and collective, the intersection of gender with the entities comprising the Trinity cannot be ignored.

The concept of the Trinity is integrated into Lutheran liturgies through the recitation of creeds and similar ritual statements of faith. Christian doctrines such as the Athanasian Creed¹⁹ refer to the elements of the Holy Trinity in the distinctly gendered terms of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is this type of traditional, doctrinal language that the modern Church continues to perpetuate. The greatest challenge to genderless God-language is the lack of concern for a gender binary that is harmful and inaccurate to both God-language and those speaking about God. Reliance on supposedly foolproof tradition provides one of the most complex obstacles to shifting God-language away from gender; as previously mentioned, tradition is often considered to be an infallible approach to theology and worship, preventing Christians from considering God's genderless totality.

Cheng describes the traditional doctrine of the Trinity as an "internal community of radical love," suggesting that it rejects gender divisions through depicting God as "both the 'self' *and* the 'other'."²⁰ While the Trinity in many ways displays God's complex wholeness, the components of the Trinity taken individually—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—tends to confuse the issue of gendering God. It is believed by Christians, scholars, and theologians that the incarnational person of Jesus was biologically male, as there is no assertion of anything to the contrary. Jesus is often referred to in terms of being "fully human *and* fully God." It is due to the humanity of Jesus' existence that Jesus was ascribed a biological sex

¹⁸ Cheng, *Radical Love*, 56.

¹⁹ Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, "The Creeds and Prayer FAQs," *Lutheran Church Missouri Synod*, Accessed January 17 2018, <https://www.lcms.org/about/beliefs/faqs/doctrine#creeds>.

²⁰ Cheng, *Radical Love*, 56.

and a presumably corresponding gender. The embodiment of God through Jesus was and is gendered and sexed. Yet, while the sex of Jesus is accepted as male, to what extent does this determine the genders of God and Holy Spirit? Cheng emphasizes the *roles* that are present in the Trinity rather than the socially constructed genders associated with each: “God the begetter” (Father), “God the begotten” (Son), and “God the procession” (Holy Spirit).²¹ This analysis of the Trinity places significance on the roles of the three entities based on their relation to one another, not on their relation to each entity’s gender. Reconsidering the intersection of gender and the Trinity may ultimately lead to a transformation in how the Church approaches God-language. This intersection must be practically reassessed by Church leaders, through the current use of gender in everything that comprises liturgy.

VI. Gender and Scripture

While the doctrine of the Trinity displays God’s embodiment through Christ, other embodiments of God exist throughout Scripture. Many theologians have interpreted Scripture in terms of gender and sexuality, often through arguments that support genderless conceptions of God. In her essay entitled “The Priest at the Altar: The Eucharistic Erasure of Sex,” Elizabeth Stuart discusses interpretations of Exodus, citing Howard Eilberg-Schwartz. Stuart expands on conceptions of God’s gender based on how God interacts with humans in Scripture; she begins with the passage from Exodus 33 that depicts an encounter between Moses and God:

Moses responded, “Then show me thy glorious presence.”
The Lord replied, “I will make all my goodness pass before you...But you may not look directly at my face, for no one may see me and live...I will remove my hand and let you see me from behind. But my face will not be seen.”²²

²¹ Ibid., 56.

²² Ex. 33:18-23 NRSV.

According to Stuart, some theologians view “this exposure of the back of God [as] a deliberate attempt to obscure the sex of the divine.”²³ These claims assert that God’s intentions were both to protect Moses *and* to keep the gender of God ambiguous by hiding God’s “face.”²⁴ Through only showing God’s back, God refuses to be gendered or defined by limited human constructions. This argument relies on the description of an embodied God in Scripture, one that is distinct and separate from Jesus’ body in the Gospels.

God is embodied in other moments of the Hebrew Bible, such as the moment in Genesis in which God is walking in the garden, among Adam and Eve: “They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden.”²⁵ This narration portrays God in a physical sense, an embodiment that can walk, see, and be hidden from. Notably, the book of Genesis lends much to the discussion of gender and humanity, but in this instance Godself is embodied but not gendered.

Wayne A. Meeks similarly compares Scripture from the Hebrew Bible to the New Testament, illustrating that gender divisions are dissolved through the Gospel message and the Resurrection. Meeks references a different passage from Genesis: “...in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them.”²⁶ Meeks writes that a later passage in Galatians breaks down these early gender divisions established in Genesis.²⁷ This passage of Galatians states, “...there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ

²³ Elizabeth Stuart, “The Priest at the Altar,” in *Trans/formations*, Eds. Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood (London: SCM Press, 2009), 128.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 127-8.

²⁵ Gen. 3:8 NRSV.

²⁶ Gen. 1:27 NRSV.

²⁷ Wayne A. Meeks, “The Image of the Androgyne: Some Uses of a Symbol in Earliest Christianity,” *History of Religions* 13, no. 3 (1974): 185.

Jesus.”²⁸ These analyses of *human* gender in Scripture show that human-constructed gender divisions fade away after the Gospel message of the Resurrection. As the Scriptural basis for *human* gender is analyzed, the *imago Dei* bears on the ways in which we conceive of God’s gendered embodiment.

VII. Gender and Music

The primary way in which the Church has remained complicit in gender exclusion is through liturgical language in worship spaces. The way forward for the ELCA and other denominations is to intentionally examine all of its liturgies and worship programs. One such way to do this is through the choice of hymns, which often contain language that goes unnoticed. The issue with gendered liturgies extends beyond Scripture and doctrine, requiring an analysis of musical language. Hymns contain language for and about God that is often taken for granted, yet words that are sung influence conceptions of God just as much as the rest of spoken liturgy.

The *Evangelical Lutheran Worship (ELW)* hymnal denotes certain hymns under an “Expanded Images for God” section, marking hymns that characterize God in unique or nontraditional ways, while the 1978 *LBW* hymnal does not. Many of these “Expanded Images” hymns portray God through gendered pronouns, as well as a myriad of roles. The very inclusion of such a section in the most recently published ELCA hymnal speaks to the progress already manifesting within ELCA congregations. One “Expanded Image” hymn entitled “God the Sculptor of the Mountains” speaks to God’s infinite roles: “God the sculptor of the mountains, God the miller of the sand, God the jeweler of the heavens, God

²⁸ Gal. 3:28 NRSV.

the potter of the land...”²⁹ This hymn uses only the gender-neutral pronouns “you,” “we,” and “us.” The hymn continues with each verse adding multiple interpretations of God through manmade roles that, when taken together, seem to display God’s magnificence. However, while the concept of marking out these hymns is helpful, many of them still portray God in binary ways. One of the significant barriers to removing gender from God-language is the necessity for humans to relate to God in ways they can understand. “God the Sculptor,” exemplifies the possibility of genderless God-language that is still relatable and meaningful to Christians in its awe-inspired conception of God.

The *Lutheran Book of Worship (LBW)* published in 1978 was produced in the midst of a culture that was also shaping many of the previously discussed feminist theologians. As a significantly earlier publication, it is understandable that the *LBW* does not parallel the *ELW* in attempts to show inclusive or nontraditional God-language. In the case of the “Expanded Images” hymns previously discussed, many were not included in the *LBW* at all, later added to the *ELW* in 2006. Of course, not all of the language in either Lutheran hymnal is ideal in regard to gender. Both hymnals include long-revered hymns such as “A Mighty Fortress is Our God,” that are riddled with patriarchal “Lord” imagery and comprised primarily of male pronouns: “A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing...”³⁰ Many ELCA congregations face these issues of gendered language beyond the hymnals as well, when attempting to integrate contemporary Christian music into worship programs.

ELCA congregations have moved toward frequent inclusion of contemporary “praise” music in worship in attempts to appeal to younger generations, in order to utilize

²⁹ John Thornburg and Amanda Husberg, *ELW*, number 736.

³⁰ Martin Luther, *ELW* 505, *LBW* 228 and 229.

sanctuary technology, or to give opportunities to live congregational musicians. While these goals are positive for congregations, much of this contemporary Christian music is problematic both theologically and through its language that may exclude congregants on the bases of race, gender, or sexuality. In regard to gendered God-language, one of the significant issues in contemporary praise music is the use of gendered pronouns to refer to multiple entities of the Trinity. In many praise songs, artists use “He” rather ambiguously, leaving it unclear whether they are singing about God, Jesus, or both. As previously mentioned, this conflation of the genders of each element of the Trinity can perpetuate exclusive conceptions of God. Though ELCA congregations often utilize contemporary praise music, to fully examine the God-language in Lutheran liturgy, we must look back to the traditional hymnals and the examples they have set for God-language.

VIII. Gender and Public Prayer

Music is only one element of liturgy, and while ministry leaders and congregations should be more aware of their musical selections, there are many steps necessary to correcting God-language. The primary source of God-language comes to Christians in the *spoken* liturgies they hear and participate in through worship. This includes a range of texts, from Eucharistic or baptismal rituals to public congregational prayer. Prayer is an important source of God-language, as it speaks both *to* and *of* God. Prayers spoken during the public worship program have the ability to shape congregants’ individual God-language. To begin to shift attitudes about God-language in prayer, the ELCA must look to progressive liturgical materials, such as those liturgies designed for LGBTQ+ inclusive communities. One such prayer, inspired by Ephesians 3:18-19, prays:

Creative Conversationalist,
You speak to us through Scripture,

Even today;
 You cry to us through the oppressed,
 Even today;
 You rejoice with us through the uplifted,
 Even today.
 Remind us through your incessant chattering
 That we do not need to stop talking among ourselves,
 No matter what conclusions we seem to arrive at.
 Keep us talking.
 Keep us listening.
 Speak to us and through us:
 Cry, rejoice and pray with us,
 Even now.
 In Christ. In Spirit.³¹

Liturgies that are inspired by the example of such a prayer are ones that will bring about change in the Church. This prayer exemplifies an inclusive public prayer, one that can relate to all congregants as well as acknowledging the need for reform. One of the ways that ELCA congregations can begin to initiate a change in God-language and inclusivity is through the attentiveness to congregational prayer. The combination of Scripture, hymns, doctrine, and prayer are the main sources of liturgical God-language; beginning with an analysis of these will allow the ELCA to shift gendered God-language dramatically.

IX. Conclusions: Inclusive Liturgies and Other Examples of Change

In Mary Daly's *The Church and the Second Sex*, she writes that the Church is in a "transitional stage," saying, "...we are experiencing a dramatic cleavage between those who, looking to the horizon, affirm that the world is moving, and those who stubbornly insist that nothing changes."³² Daly said this in 1975, but it is just as true and applicable to ministry today. It is still a time of transition, of accepting and including more radically than

³¹Chris Glaser, "Dialogue Together," In *Courage to Love*, compiled by Geoffrey Duncan (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2002), 209.

³²Mary Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1975), 220.

ever before. This transition beyond a gendered God to a conception of God's all-encompassing totality may be able to welcome those who have felt ignored by the Church, and bring Christians together through an awe-inspired conception of a genderless God. Christians have relied heavily on God-language that depicts a God that is just like them. Hipsher writes of the challenges of overcoming traditional conceptions of God, saying: "We must first understand that God is not exclusively defined by the Western patriarchal image of white, male, heterosexual, educated, middle- and upper-class people without physical, mental or emotional challenges."³³ The element of God-language currently lacking is acknowledgment of how different God is from humans.

The contributions of feminist and queer theologians have shown that liturgies and traditions can be changed, expanded, and created anew to better connect the changing lives of Christians to God. The work that has already been done to expand the Church's inclusion has also evidenced that reform takes time. It would be too simple to swap pronouns for God in prayer and song, but the underlying attitudes toward both gender and God-language are in need of constant and deep work. The Church of Sweden has just announced a recommendation for its clergy to progress towards gender-neutral God-language, "refraining from using terms such as 'Lord' and 'he' in favour of the less specific 'God.'"³⁴ While this decision has been met with backlash, primarily in the name of tradition, the reality of this change already taking place in other churches displays the necessity and viability of such reform for the ELCA. At some point, tradition cannot be considered

³³ B.K. Hipsher, "God is a Many Gendered Thing," 94.

³⁴ Associated Press in Stockholm, "Church of Sweden to stop referring to God as 'he' or 'Lord,'" *The Guardian*, Nov. 24 2017, accessed Dec. 28 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/nov/24/church-of-sweden-to-stop-referring-to-god-as-he-or-lord>

intrinsically infallible, such as referring to God in purely masculine terms. Similarly, the fact that the social construction of a gender binary has been so ingrained in our society does not mean that it is a healthy or productive means of categorization. On the surface, a genderless God may seem to relate to no one personally, but perhaps reassessing our relation to God may allow God's magnificence to relate to everything and everyone in a radically new way. A genderless God can encompass all people, simultaneously relating to each individually and to all collectively. The modern Church must acknowledge that gender and sexual minorities have been excluded from and tormented by the Church in the very recent past, an injustice that cannot be rectified soon enough. To truly welcome all people to worship, the Church needs to be able to relate to each person through genderless God-language, integrated into the entire liturgy.

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